Simple Gifts

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On a wall of his downtown Manhattan studio, Robert Ryman has assembled a mural of eight by ten inch black and white photographs. It is a good place to begin, since it is to this wall that the artist himself regularly returns to add a new image or to consult old ones. The three hundred or more photographs that compose this still expanding grid document the majority of Ryman's production from his first acknowledged canvas of the 1950s to his most recent oil on fibreglass works.

Pictures of paintings, their grey tonalities average out manifold subtleties at which the viewer must guess. The casual impulse to wonder what one is missing grows with the realization that those tantalizingly imperceptible nuances are the vital substance of the complex entity these glossies wanly describe. Colourless, and with textures in many cases only faintly recorded - or in others exaggerated by harsh studio lighting - the photographs give the overall impression of continuous variations on a basic square format, punctuated at intervals by anomalous vertical or horizontal rectangles, a scored circle, or strutted panels mounted at right angles to the wall. The forward flow of these variations is soon interrupted, however, by the viewer's scanning reflexes. Rather than reading the photo sequence left to right and first to last in descending rows, one's glance automatically skips forward and back, up, down and across, remarking on correlations and distinctions while remaining essentially indifferent to their chronological incidence, which, in reality, is approximate at best. Perceived in this manner the wall seems less like the autobiography of the painter and more like a genetic diagram showing how certain dominant and recessive traits have asserted themselves in a species of paintings whose apparent inbreeding has - counter to the rule - enriched rather than diminished the stock, and whose aberrant strains possess an unmistakable family resemblance as well as a singular beauty.

Academic habits of looking and of thought are undone by this hopscotch arrangement. The ensemble's essential cohesion relieves the anxious compulsion to impose provisional order on fragmentary evidence. And so, routine questions about technical or stylistic evolution lag harmlessly behind the darting eye and unburdened mind pleasurably awakened to signs of heterogeneity among these superficially homogeneous images. Chief among the rewards of surrendering to that fascination are the patience it teaches and the calm it instils. Meanwhile, the promise these pictured paintings hold

of future change is manifest in their sheer proliferation. Rather than speculating on the 'next' based on the 'last', one is content to wait and see. To wait, that is, the better to see.

Intuitive at its source, Ryman's work respects one strict rule: what is present is what matters and what came before or after matters only insofar as it too makes a unique claim for our attention. Consequently, approaching Ryman's work in terms of his contribution to the advancement of the modernist cause is a mistake, just as it is a mistake to assign importance to given works in terms of their contribution to the painter's progress or to painting's progress. Although Ryman has added much to our visual experience and is de facto a modern artist, his work hasn't progressed so much as elaborated itself under the artist's close watch. This occurs not by means of ever more complex rearrangements of his signature devices, but by an ever-increasing number of similarly concise statements about what paint can do. It is the growing sum of these statements that describe Ryman's widening field of possi-bility.

Returning to Ryman's photo log, let us change from the genetic model to a mathematical one, always bearing in mind that we are dealing in metaphor applied to the work of a visual artist and not with the laws of logic. Elementary geometry has it that there are two infinities: one is arrived at by perpetual addition, the other by perpetual division. In the modern era concepts of artistic development have been predicated on the first notion. Accordingly, prospects for aesthetic growth exist in an already historicized future and that future exists to the degree that the present can be added to in units of innovation and achievement comparable to those of the past. Failure to match or follow apace with these hope-giving precedents is taken as a sign of diminishing returns, if not imminent exhaustion. Hence, in our day, the incessant talk about the end of art, and the consequent restlessness of those who seek to postpone the event or distract themselves from its approach by a headlong chase after novelty. More hopeless still are those who renounce such a flight forward as futile, opting instead for angry inertia.

Yet contained within the simple mathematical paradigm of step by step linear development is another infinity represented by the unlimited subdivision of any given point on that line. This, in effect, is the hypothetical opportunity Ryman has seized. For him the imagination schedules its own necessities. Simple ideas may at any moment brake ideological or stylistic 'development' to make time for their realization. I say 'brake' not 'break', since the result is an alert pause rather than the dramatic aesthetic rupture of the kind

celebrated in modernist myth. By contrast with conservative demurrals however, such pauses are active rather than passive.

Wherever an artist like Ryman comes to a halt and fully focuses in this manner, art-making starts rather than ceases - even when 'less' appears to be definitively less'.

How many ways, Ryman has repeatedly and pragmatically asked, can one take the most reductive kind of painting - the apparently one-colour-one-format work

- and generate from it a complete, indeed protean world. Each painting the artist makes is a partial reponse to that question. Viewed together, their photo surrogates articulate the larger answer. Like a series of open parentheses, each component image and those neighbouring it on the wall suggest other paintings as yet unmade.

Indeed, photos of newer paintings that Ryman has tacked at the end of the line-up might just as well have been inserted at numerous intervals within it. Moreover, quite a few prints within the mural grid include several paintings on one eight by ten inch sheet, as if a single image equivalent to a single point in the sequence had been split up further to show the subset of variants that could be directly derived from it.

This said, the linear model is still restrictive. However, the operating principle of endless, non-redundant division holds true in a two-dimensional as well as a one-dimensional framework. Fractal calculations thus allow one to take a simple geometric shape and dilate its contour, revealing myriad previously imperceptible facets, like the magnified dots that trace a form on a video-screen matrix. Applied to geography, for example, an evenly unfolding coastline can be broken into increasingly smaller crenulations - from promontory to rock to grain of sand - thereby creating a marvelously detailed and eccentric boundary around a previously well-defined territory. That in graphic terms is the procedure Ryman has followed as he has taken painting's measure. His studio mural - inwardly divisible and outwardly expanding - is a composite overview of the aesthetic continent he has discovered where many thought there was only a tiny desert island.

II

The biographical details customarily mentioned in Ryman's exhibition catalogues are so brief as to deter further inquiry. Seldom has less been said or generally known about the background of a major contemporary painter.

In America, this is especially striking given the role - most often distracting and distorting - that personality cults have played in the estimation of comparably important artists. The paucity of information about Ryman's life reflects his desire to forestall such mythmaking and follows from his insistence that we focus exclusively on the painting as painting.' It also results from the fact that Ryman's life has been uneventful. Contrary to romantic tradition, art is far less conditioned by crisis than it is by hunches and chances pursued in cycles of activity whose duration and productivity reveal the artist's nature and will. For anyone making anything over the long haul or the short, getting from thought to thing is difficult and suspenseful enough. Decisiveness is character, and genuine creative drama unfolds in the order that artistic choices are made in service of one's intuitions and in the context of one's opportunities. In Ryman's case, the crucial decisions were forthright and firm from the outset but they were precipitated by a casual experiment.

Born in 1930, Ryman grew up in a middle-class family in Nashville, Tennessee.

Such artistic leanings as he had were musical; his mother was an amateur pianist and as a boy Ryman took piano lessons but, as often happens at that age, he hated practising and soon quit. In high school, he started listening to late-night jazz broadcasts from New York, and on entering college in 1948 at the Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, he hung around the music department, made contacts among the students, and soon after took up the saxophone. Switching to the George Peabody College for Teachers because it had a better music school, he concentrated on jazz despite the lack of local opportunities to hear or play it. The Korean War interrupted his education. In anticipation of being drafted for active military service, Ryman joined the Army Reserve Band, in which he spent his tour of duty (1950-2) travelling around the South performing for parades, concerts, and service clubs.

Impatient after this frustrating two-year stint playing marches, pop standards and dance numbers, Ryman abandoned plans to finish college and headed straight for New York to study with a working jazz pianist about whom he had heard from Army friends. Arriving with $250, an untested ambition, and few expectations, Ryman greeted what he found with the unabashed enthusiasm of a Frank Capra provincial on the town. He certainly felt none of the bohemian alienation of 1950's legend. A string of temporary jobs - mail-room clerk on Wall Street, a stock manager in a chinaware importing firm - earned him the minimum necessary to pay for food, lodging, music lessons, and the

freedom to roam the city. By his own account, he saw 'everything, just like a tourist'? 'Everything' included the major art museums, where, except for the odd landscape in a Nashville home, he encountered paintings for the first time.

Meanwhile, Ryman studied his instrument. Bebop was his model. They played something you never heard. It was different, it wasn't predictable. [But] I was never interested in free jazz. I was interested in jazz with a structure. It definitely had to have structure.'3 With lessons once or twice a week and the occasional chance to sit in on sessions at small bars around town, Ryman's musical life was active but only intermittently so, and there was plenty of time left over. During this period he rented a single room in a brownstone facing the loading dock of Bloomingdale's department store, an out-of-the-way address he shared with a cellist and a movie orchestra clarinetist. Down the block on the corner of 60th Street and Lexington Avenue was an art-supply store.

'I went in,' he recalled and bought some oil paint and canvas board and some brushes - they didn't have acrylic at that time - and some turpentine.

I was just seeing how the paint worked, and how the brushes worked. I was just using the paint, putting it on a canvas board, putting it on thinly with turpentine, and thicker to see what that was like, and trying to make something happen without any specific idea what I was painting.'*

The experience took immediate hold. And the nearly aimless decisions first taken by this drop-in have ever since prevailed, modified only by the acute concentration that he has directed to that amateur impulse to see 'how paint worked'. Those powers of concentration were paired with an equally stubborn determination to find out 'how' on his own. Aside from a few classes spent drawing from plaster casts, 'Very boring, they had numbers for different shadings', and a brief adult course at The Museum of Modern Art, "it was a little drawing with the model, sometimes it was working with collage', Ryman shunned art schools. Soon music took a back seat to painting while painting showed him what was basic to its practice. At this crucial point, Ryman's remedial aesthetic education was his employment, or rather the choice of the latter became a function of the former.

Attracted by the possibility of spending all his days around art and by a late-morning starting time and short hours conducive to his painting schedule, Ryman signed on as a guard at The Museum of Modern Art in June 1953, a position he kept until May 1960.

As he had on his first excursions around New York, Ryman took everything in this new setting pretty much as it came. I was very open, I accepted anything I saw.

I mean I didn't reject things, I looked at hundreds of painters. Of course the giants of the time I looked at more, Matisse, Cézanne, Picasso, all of that. But I guess I was very naive. I felt that anything in a museum was worthy of being there. So Ilooked at everything and got something from everything." In due course - and making good use of the restricted movement that is typical of a guard's routine - Ryman learned to schedule his looking. A week or so was spent concentrating on one major artist, then another week on the next. Cézanne enthralled him 'because you wouldn't know how he did it, the building up, the structure, the complicated composition'? Matisse, whom he prized above all, fascinated him for almost the opposite reason; his outward simplicity and calm. The appearance of just such confident and unconflicted command of the medium was Matisse's stated ambi tion. Writing in 1948, Matisse had said, Thave always tried to hide my own efforts and wanted my work to have the lightness and joyousness of Springtime, which never lets anyone suspect the labor it has cost'® Ryman has voiced the same intention in much the same language. Matisse, he observed, 'could see more than others could see - he managed to get at problems and solve them in a very straightforward and clear way. Then there was his technical mastery, the way he could handle paint.

When he worked, there was no fussing around. He was always direct. There was a sureness about what he did.' Among classic modernists Ryman admired Monet and Klee as well - a Klee picture, for example, inspired him briefly to try mixing wax into his pigments. However, Ryman's far deeper involvement with and debt to Matisse has nothing to do with stylistic influence but instead represents his discovery of an art that is exquisitely controlled without awareness of the skill or authority behind that control detracting from the viewer's direct sensation. However stressful their genesis or seemingly careless their detail, Matisse's works in their final form appear wholly deliberate, economical, and fresh. These qualities, Ryman came to understand, were equally essential to non-figurative painting.

They were qualities Ryman simultaneously found in the work of Mark Rothko.

Significantly, the period of Ryman's service at The Museum of Modern Art coincided with that institution's recognition of Rothko and his contemporaries. In those eight years, a series of exhibitions featured Abstract Expressionist works, and in 1958 and 1959 the museum assembled

and toured The New American Painting, its influential survey of that tendency. During the same period, many of the first examples of New York School paintings entered the museum's holdings. Prior to 1950, only Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky had been properly represented. With the start of the decade, however, Abstract Expressionist works began to be actively acquired and regularly hung in the galleries dedicated to the permanent collection where Ryman was stationed most of the time, although at any moment only one or two works by a given artist would be on view. Number 10', 1950, the first Rothko Ryman ever saw, was accessioned by the museum in

1952 - the very year Ryman was hired — as was Franz Kline's 'Chief", 1950, de Kooning's 'Woman II', 1952, and Pollock's 'Full Fathom Five', 1947, and

'Number 12', 1949. By the time Ryman left The Museum of Modern Art one could see examples of work by virtually all the significant artists of that generation, along with additional works by artists already mentioned; Clyfford Still's 'Painting', 1951 was acquired in 1954, Philip Guston's 'Painting', 1954 entered the collection in 1956, Barnett Newman's 'Abraham', 1949 and a second Rothko, 'Red, Brown, and Black', 1958 followed in 1959.10

Among the Abstract Expressionists, Ryman respected de Kooning, whose way of putting a painting together impressed him, and Pollock, whose all-over drip painting he thought compellingly strange - though he was 'shocked' by Pollock's late reintroduction of imagery. Ryman also had high regard for Guston and his early light-suffused and oil-encrusted abstractions - They were very mysterious and simple and I really liked the way they were painted'" - and for Bradley Walker Tomlin, whose gracefully gestural canvases still enthrall him. Ryman's enthusiasm for Kline was even greater.

'Although I wasn't all that influenced by Kline, he was

really important. In fact he's underrated.. He was a magnificent painter.' 'He had the same quality that Matisse had, in a sense of that sureness. It was so open and compositionally so right. '« Rothko's comparable assurance and clarity struck a still deeper chord in Ryman. 'When I saw this Rothko, I thought "Wow, what is this? I don't know what's going on but I like it." What was radical with Rothko, of course, was that there was no reference to any representational influence. There was color, there was form, there was structure, the surface, the light - the nakedness of it, just there. There weren't any paintings like that. 13 Consistent with that frontal 'naked-ness',

Rothko's work was unframed and painted around the edge of the stretcher, so that each canvas offered itself to view as an object rather than as a conventionally flat screen onto which the artist projected light or shapes or marks.

Of the purely abstract paintings and reliefs by Dutch, Russian or German artists of the early modernist period to which Ryman had ready access at The Museum of Modern Art, none, surprisingly, struck him in this way. Thus it was Rothko, not the Neo-Plasticists, the Constructivists or the Bauhaus artists who taught him that paintings must be treated as integrated physical entities. If the other 'field' painters of Rothko's generation have so far gone unmentioned that is because they played little part in Ryman's experience or thinking despite what would seem to be the aptness of their work to his development. Although Ad Reinhardt had been a ubiquitous and combative presence on the New York scene for years, his polemics did not engage Ryman, nor did the increasingly close-valued monochrome paintings Reinhardt showed at Betty Parsons Gallery - red or blue scales in 1952 and 1953, all-black scales after 1955. Incidentally, in 1960, when Ryman left the museum, no Reinhardt was yet in its collection. As for Barnett Newman, despite his occasional participation in group shows at Betty Parsons, his work was unseen in quantity between 1951 and 1959, the year of his career-launching one-person show at French & Co. and the year his 'Abraham', 1949 was acquired by the museum. Agnes Martin was likewise unrepresented in one-person shows until 1958, when she exhibited works still containing symbolic shapes akin to those of Adolph Gottlieb. Back from Paris in 1953, Ellsworth Kelly was more visible during Ryman's early New York years, exhibiting at Parsons in 1956, 1957 and 1960, as well as in the Whitney Museum of Art's Young Americans show of 1957, and The Museum of Modern Art's Sixteen Americans in the winter of 1959-60. Even so, Ryman doesn't recall being aware of Kelly until much later, and in any case Kelly's unin-flected, highly saturated chromatic compositions had nothing in common with Ryman's intensely brushed, tonally muted and largely white work - except for the very different type of connection to Matisse each separate body of work expressed Familiarity with the museum's collection and keeping abreast of current gallery exhibitions immersed Ryman in the painting culture of the New York School, but only to the extent that the work attracted his interest. He was entirely detached from its social and philosophical milieus. Unlike many young artists who hastened to hang out with the first-generation Abstract Expressionists, Ryman hung back. I was shy. I remember going to the Cedar Bar in the late '50s, and it was so depressing because I

didn't know very many people in New York. I felt also that, well, I wasn't much of a painter. I couldn't really talk to painters because I felt I wasn't worthy ... It was a very lonely time for me because I didn't know any painters who were working in an approach like mine. 1 Nor did he concern himself with the critical discourse around Abstract Expressionism. Ryman thus ignored the existentialist literature of creation, even when his earliest paintings superficially resembled work to which such rationales were commonly applied. For example, the dramatic erasures characteristic of much Abstract Expressionist studio procedure were widely interpreted at the time as evidence of the imaginative struggle to discover or disengage an image. Although Ryman too was finding his form, he eschewed such readings and followed a different process. De Kooning, Guston and others alternately added and subtracted pigment from their canvases developing a whole vocabulary of smears and scrape-backs, whereas Ryman added but did not visibly subtract paint. Furthermore, the similarities one can find between Kline's taut achromatic paintings and Ryman's small caseins and oils of 1957-9, in which dark blocks invade a white ground, also derive from fundamentally dissimilar painterly methods and motivations. Ryman's are the product of the fingers and hand, not the arm. Gesture, for him, served paint rather than the painter; painting was a question of application rather than of 'action'. Contrary, then, to Harold Rosenberg's view of abstraction as an exercise in the rhetoric of self-affirmation, Ryman understood it even at that formative stage as a problem of material syntax.

What paint had to say was its own name, and it said it best in measured tones.

'It was never a rejection', Ryman maintains. 'Just a different approach to paint-ing. Artists don't think in the way of rejecting something. Abstract Expressionism was fine. I mean they're very good paintings. You can't throw that away. I just couldn't see that much challenge in it. You want to discover something else... a new way of seeing.' Is Ryman's indifference to critical debate is characteristic of his autodidactic and unswerving visual course. While at the Modern, he made regular use of the library and after leaving the museum in 1960 worked for a time in the Art Division of the New York Public Library where he perused artists' files, periodicals and books - all in pursuit of new things to look at rather than verbal explanations for them.

Fundamentally, though, Ryman's education consisted of direct and protracted scrutiny of individual paintings. Such a formation is increasingly exceptional at a time when more and more young artists have been trained

to see painting through photographic means, and consequently handle or mishandle the medium in anticipation of the same altered transmission of their output. This change in aesthetic context was the predicate for much of post-modern or appropriation-based art made in the 198os. Yet, at this advanced stage in what the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin in the 193os dubbed the 'Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Ryman's work distinguishes itself by being all but unreproducible. Hardly due to any ideological intent on the artist's part, this fact nevertheless puts the lie to theoretical canard that the individual handmade image has been superceded or can be entirely assimilated by photo-printing processes. Informed by his own habits of looking at classic modern art, Ryman insists example by example on contemporary painting's equal demand and capacity to exist and be experienced as an irreducibly physical and aesthetic presence.

The aesthetic constants that permitted his 'new way of seeing' were all evident in the artist's initial essays, though his full appreciation of them awaited two basic clarifications. From the outset, Ryman's painterly 'approach' - a favourite word - simply consisted of seeing how his tools and raw materials would behave. Each mark, area, or textural incident tested the characteristics of the pigment, the sur-face, the brush, or all three simultaneously. Cancellation of one result by another edited these experiments in favour of painterly gestures whose consistency, place-ment, or sheer unexpectedness merited lasting attention. Ryman's first experimental painting was predominantly green. Started around 1955 and worked on until 1959, the first painting he acknowledged as a fulfilled work (no.1) is predominantly orange. Since then, white has replaced or largely obliterated all other hues. Like everything about Ryman's procedure, this decision was arrived at through trial and error, yet like much else about his work, the constant - though wonderfully inconsistent - use of white has been misconstrued as the expression of a concept or symbol. Inevitably an artist's exclusive use of one colour leads to a discussion of modernism's reductionist penchant, and the most extreme statement of that tendency in its binary form. Critic Lucy Lippard, who was married to Ryman during the early 196o, offers a useful summary of this dichotomy: 'The ultimate in monotone painting is the black or white canvas. As the two extremes, the so-called no-colors, white and black are associated with pure and impure, open and closed. The white painting is a "blank" canvas, where all is potential; the black painting has obviously been painted, but painted out, hidden, destroyed.'16

Ryman's recourse to white is paradoxical insofar as he has used it to conceal as well as to disclose his cumulative structure; that is, he has hidden his empirical painterly process under a blanket of white in order to reveal the painting as a whole.

Instead of referring to or resolving into virgin blankness, therefore, white brought to light his work's intense surface activity and its underlying preparation. 'As I worked and developed the painting', he recalled, I found that I was eliminating a lot. I would put the color down, then paint over the color, trying to get down to a few crucial elements. It was like erasing something to put white over it.'" This he already had accomplished with sharply contrasting hues; white especially recommended itself by what it didn't do as well as what it did. 'The use of white in my paintings came about when I realized that it doesn't interfere. It's a neutral color that allows for a clarification of nuances in painting. It makes other aspects of painting visible that would not be so clear with the use of other colors.'18

A part of his palette from the beginning, black was disqualified as an overall substitute for or alternative to white by two factors. The first was what seemed to the artist to be its ineluctable symbolism: 'Black is difficult,' Ryman reasoned, there was no mysticism involved, nothing like that with white." The greater liability, though, was how black isolated the painted object from its setting. I did an etching once printed in black to see how it would be', he remembered. 'If you use black or any specific color, it makes the structure less visible. You see the color and it makes it look like a shape.20 This description nicely defines the difference between Ryman's concerns and those of Reinhardt - whose subtly hued 'mono-chrome® paintings flicker at the extreme limit of perceptibility - and Kelly, who fuses colour, area and shape into vibrant silhouettes. Reinhardt confined his attention to the darkened interior of the canvas which was set off by that darkness from the wall, while Kelly takes the space around the work very much into account by emphasizing the dynamic contrast between the ordinarily subdued exhibition space and his painted form's saturated colour and often startling axial pitch.

For his part, Ryman treats the immaculate walls of the modern gallery as a given against which he plays with a wide range of substances and tonalities. These have been given the generic name 'white', but each is as distinct from the others as they are from the decorator's white of their intended surroundings. The closer Ryman's choice comes to those utilitarian whites, the more exactly such distinctions are perceived. When he actually shifts

from artists' materials to housepainters', the matched pigments correspondingly focus one's eye on nuances in his vehicle's density, method of application, and support. Like a Bedouin who can make out the subtlest shades of sand or an Inuit who can read with precision a comparably narrow spectrum of snow and ice, Ryman has catalogued white's actual variety, thus ironically demonstrating its latent non-neutrality when seen in relation to itself. Fed up with inattentive observers who collapsed this set of differences into a word which they then used as a homogenizing description of all of his work, Ryman protested: I'm not really interested in white as a color, although I have at times used different whites for different purposes. Sometimes I used warm white because I wanted to have a warm absorbing light. At other times I've used colder white... it has do to with light - softness, hardness, reflection and movement - all these things' 21 White is used instrumentally and for itself; but 'whiteness' as such is not the work's subject or essence. 'I don't think of myself as making white paint-ings. I make paintings; I'm a painter. White paint is my medium.'~ Stripped of metaphysical connotations, white's emphatic physical plainness registered whatever was done to or near it. Ryman's reliance on the square as his basic format followed the same principle of opting for maximum neutrality.

Altogether only a handful of mature paintings are differently proportioned, and of these several, including the horizontal 'Zenith', 1974 (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York) and the verticals 'Credential' and 'Express', both 1985 (nos.73-4) are compositionally anchored by interior squares. The most direct benefit to Ryman was that the square obviated the problems of compositional balance entailed by the rectangle. Universally symmetrical, a square is inherently

"composed' 23 As a corollary, the obvious focal point implied by the coordinates running between the four equal sides or four equal corners, allowed him to operate around and especially off the centre without ever requiring him to fix it in any explicit way. Lastly, the square's unassimilated artificiality was an asset: 'It possibly contrasts with the environment more. Rectangles always were more used in painting, particularly with pictures, because they were more familiar. Windows are rectangles, doors, most of what you see. '24

Ryman, of course, had no desire to mimic the format of and thereby trigger the visual responses called for by classical picture-window painting. Nor did he wish to court comparison with traditional easel painting, abstract or figurative. Consequently his paintings have, on the whole, been either quite

small or quite large, with those in between setting themselves apart from conventional midsize painting by virtue of pronounced structural or formal characteristics of other kinds. The fact that his earliest paintings on paper or canvas generally measure between seven by seven inches and twelve by twelve inches has as much to do with their basic aesthetics as with the confinement of the living quarters in which they were executed. Throughout his career the artist has continued to work on this scale, regarding the results as commensurate in importance with paintings whose dimensions may reach upwards of twelve by twelve feet. Never have these small paintings been undertaken as mere warm-ups or sketches. Indeed, preparatory studies - when Ryman makes them, which is seldom - are usually the same size as the final version of the piece, and are not preserved after they have served their purpose.

Factors other than the size of the support also help to decide a painting's scale.

Brushes are spatial callipers of equal importance. A small surface may be covered by one or more broad strokes or a large surface by a flurry of small strokes: either of these procedural options, and all gradations that lie between them, lead to variously expanding or contracting results. The consistency of the paint also affects one's sense of scale by determining the flow of the brush, the load the brush can carry (hence the length it can travel), and the graphic and light-reflecting imprint the brush leaves behind. Everything that contributes to a painting's creation qualifies its aesthetic make-up, and is in turn qualified by the manner in which the particular element or material is handled. "Bigness' can occupy the tiniest piece of paper if painted in a 'big' - that is immediate, open - way. Conversely, a painting twice the height of a viewer can be intimate rather than overwhelming because of the closeness of inspection its luminous and tactilely modulated surface invites.

These considerations - type of white paint and its specific means of application, the square support and its exact disposition and scale - are Ryman's crucial vari-ables. Few in number, they represent a potential range of permutations that it is easy to underestimate. All along, however, modern art has largely been a response to the limitations artists have willingly imposed upon themselves. A significant number of viewers unsympathetic to, or frankly puzzled by such strictures and resistant to argument by artistic precedent, will nevertheless ask: 'Why would anybody make a thing like that?' It is a fair question, and textbook answers are of little avail against the

scepticism it bespeaks. Moreover, discounting such a response implies that only those inclined to aesthetic or art-historical discourse need concern themselves with the work - a conclusion directly at odds with the artist's own persistent belief that his paintings are there for the eye - tutored or untutored - to examine and enjoy. Turned around, however, the challenge 'What could anybody make out of things like that?' invites a speculative involvement that may bring such viewers closer to Ryman's problem and so to his actual achievement. Instead of dismissing his endeavour as absurd, dubious members of the public are, like the artist, called upon to imagine what visual riches might be coaxed from such slender means, and how many ways it is possible to materially rephrase a working premise and so extract fresh meaning from it.

All this may strike some people as a woefully unsophisticated way of addressing such a refined body of work. Yet the truth is that Ryman's starting point was, by his own admission, 'naive' 25 As a practising artist, Ryman remains the equal, not the all-knowing teacher, of the curious spectator. His extraordinary ability to renew his art depends not upon his outgrowing that naiveté but upon heeding its dictates.

The near tautological principles he has offered in explanation of his work express that single-minded devotion to 'elementary' pursuits. I wanted to paint the paint, you might say', he once told an interviewer.26 An early formal statement of this aesthetic published is scarcely more complicated, but resolute and sufficient. 'There is never a question of what to paint, but only how to paint. The how of painting has always been the image. 27

Ryman's paintings from the mid-1 95os to the very early 196os contain shapes that sometimes appear to have the status of pictorial images. In 'Untitled', 1957 (no.2) a contoured white area at the centre is attached to the top of the roughly cut canvas by a looping pencil incision in the casein paint, while the bottom margin is loosely hung, puckered by previously stapling and unprimed, prefiguring the artist's unstretched but for the most part 'all-over' canvases of the early 1960s. In

'Untitled', 1958 (no.7) a dark green wedge is fitted inside the semi-organic black mass that juts down from above into the painting's tiny field. Most spacious and spontaneous of the works into which such shapes intrude or occupy the pictorial middle ground is a work on paper named To Gertrud Mellon', 1958 (no.9) after the collector who purchased it from an exhibition of work by museum personnel that was assembled outside the Members' Dining Room of the Modern.: Abstract Expressionist figure/ground dynamics of this

kind are relatively rare, even at this early stage of Ryman's development. In 'Untitled', 1957 (no.3) and related works on paper or cloth squares, these intrusive block or bars have seemingly retracted from the centre to the margins, indenting the edge of the picture plane at irregular intervals and visually pinning down the painting's surface like the tabs or brackets that come into play after 1976. In stretched canvases such as

'Untitled', 1959 (no.14), those painted notches wrap around the work's sides.

Ryman's use of letters and numbers serves much the same compositional pur-pose. These graphic embellishments he judged appropriate to his otherwise stripped-down vocabulary on the grounds that the inclusion of the artist's signature and the date of a work's completion are traditional in painting. From the point of view of strict modernist doctrine regarding the genre's 'essential' properties, this reasoning may border on the Jesuitical, but Ryman is more whimsical than that, and at the same time more direct in claiming poetic licence. Compared with Newman's rough scrawl on flat colour fields, or de Kooning's and Guston's stylish script over roiling painterly grounds, Ryman's signature is completely integrated into the structure of his compositions. In this way he neutralized its sign value, to the benefit of the linear variety it affords him and the impact its placement has on other aspects of the painting.

The size of the letters employed by Ryman changes dramatically. Sometimes minute, sometimes spidery but blown way beyond the proportions of normal handwriting, they are drawing motifs. Repetition renders these inscriptions even more abstract. When his patterned inscriptions copy or are copied by the repetition of other elements the result is like a musical riff traded back and forth between ensemble instruments. Numerals and letters thus bridge space, tapping out visual rhythms in response to each other. Chance has helped. The dates 1961 and 1991 have, for example, occasioned the symmetrical reiteration and mirroring of is, 6s and gs. Meanwhile, both the artist's first and last names begin with R, and doubling the initial to RR soon led to tripling the same letter and then to the doubling and tripling of the final N of his surname and so to compressed letter blocks like RRYMANN that stutter across a painting or down its edge. Or the artist may sign RYMAN twice at the lower right corner of the square, as in 'Untitled', 1959 (no.10) and then answer that beat with three hatched lines in the upper left. Or, as in

'Untitled', 1961 (see no.21), he may vertically align a dozen or so short chalky paint strokes and at the bottom inscribe his name three times in tiered succession as if this delicate flourish were the Corinthian capital of an

inverted column, while without them the stubby stripes suggest a painterly prototype of Donald Judd's sculptural wall stacks. Or Ryman may simply fuse date and name into a single unit and run it out like a low entablature relief or, thinning his gesture and emphasizing the bowed Ns, Ms and Rs, transform it into a tracery arcade.

Such architectural analogies are, to be sure, the furthest thing from Ryman's thoughts.28 Structural more than ornamental, these texts, like their bar and block counterparts, are points of reference within the painting field, hugging the perimeter in one instance, jutting upward or inward from an edge in others. Generally speaking, geometric coordinates in nonobjective painting have been straight, hard-edged and plumb. Even when a pencil matrix undergirds subsequent coats of paint, the spatial marking Ryman superimposes tends to float or optically shiver; signatures slide away from the rigid axis; the square or rectangular notches along the outside of the picture plane are unevenly ruled. Neither locked in like Mondrian's, or quasi-aerodynamic like Malevich's, Ryman's spatial constructs accommodate a gentle flux akin to Guston's but with less ambivalence and greater objectivity.

Much of Ryman's work of the 1950s and early 1960s is on paper. The paper often had a yellowish tint or soon acquired one, so that the gaps between shapes, or the broad unpainted areas, create a warm edge around the cooler whites, while the paper's smooth flatness contrasts with the pigment's impasto relief. In addition to the gallery-announcement card-stock he frequently recycled into his paintings, Ryman also purchased higher-quality Bristol board. Nearly all the papers he used had 'fast' untextured surfaces, on which even the slightest variation in the paint's viscosity or the painter's manual energy were evident. Around 1959, Ryman also made a series of collages, 'Untitled' (no.10) and 'Untitled' (no. I 1) among them. Combining cutout examples of his usual repertoire of marks and shapes with directly drawn lines and painted patches, Ryman was able to compose and recompose these spare designs without relying on the process of 'painting out' preliminary or tentative steps. The transparency of the sheets and scraps of tracing paper in these collages helps to conflate the various layers while emphasizing that all of them ultimately relate to the implicit plane behind them, which in their original, unframed state was the wall.

Ryman's early paintings on canvas make use of the soft tints of unpainted fabric in ways comparable to his exploitation of bare paper. Nearly half of the atypically vertical 'Untitled', 1958 (no.4) is given over to a zone of sized

cotton duck on which the only 'painting' is a white signature and date. Just a small triangle of untouched canvas appears in 'Untitled', 1959 (no.12), framing an ochre RRYMAN that protrudes into the choppy white around it like a breakwater banked by a sandbar. In the latter example the light tan of the canvas picks up, but also diffuses, the intense glow of the letters, whereas in the former the blanched lettering and the honey-coloured cloth contrast sharply. In both instances the ageing of materials has altered the colour relationships between applied pigment and the natural pigmentation of the support, with the yellowing of the glue primers reinforcing the normal darkening of the cotton. Furthermore, oil paint itself changes over time, particularly the whites. And yet, these inevitable tonal or chromatic mutations are of only relative consequence. Even if we are no longer looking at these works in their original state, we are nevertheless viewing works that have evolved as coherent wholes and are defined by the chromatic and textural interplay between the assertive presence and the intentional absence of paint.

Inspired by Rothko's truly 'all-over' and all-around canvases, Ryman attended to every facet of his own paintings. Hence the untouched sides of a work were as much part of the whole as those sides that were whitened or accented by colour blocks and letters. To ensure that these easily overlooked passages are taken into account, Ryman has often photographed such works obliquely as well as head-on

- for example 'Untitled', 1959 (no.14). Something of the opposite happens in another canvas of the same year, 'Untitled' (no.13), where Ryman sliced into a seam and peeled off a layer of canvas around the upper left-hand corner of the stretcher so that the sides came to meet the painting's face. The resulting ridge creates an aggressive element of relief on the edge where we expect the painting to stop. At a distance, the flayed and rolled-back fabric is easily mistaken for a lip of pigment, and the confusion is encouraged by the raw underpainting its retraction exposes. Fissures and cavities filled with saturated colour are common in his works of this period, providing unexpected depths and highlights to the vibrant white crusts. Far from being a monochrome painter, Ryman in the early years almost always fleshed out his paintings over a polychrome bed of terracotta browns, blood reds, golden ochres, putty-like Naples yellows, deep leafy or acidic greens, and cool cobalt and cerulean blues. In short, Ryman's palette encompassed a modified but full spectrum of primaries. Before he ever introduced white, the artist laid in these rich hues, and in the finished painting their presence is papable even when they were not actually exposed. In paintings like 'Untitled', 1961

(no.19) a soft green and blue aura can thus be seen at the littoral where washed whites dissolve into buff linen. Peeking through the pitted white terrain of other paintings are flashes of brilliant colour. Where these substrata are most pronounced, the welts of underpainting exert pressure on their white mantle such that one begins to feel the temperature of the buried colour like a pulse or sinuous movement beneath the skin. Submerged colours seem to irradiate and be subsumed by the bleached plane that confronts the viewer, as if one were witnessing white light being created, as it theoretically is, by the chromatic fusion of the total spectrum.

During the period 1955-65, Ryman stuck to traditional media: casein which dries quickly and has finishes from semigloss to glossy; gouache, another water-based paint that dries matt; and oil, which dries slowly, can be applied either thinly like the others or very thickly, and depending on the quality of tube pigment and use of diluting additives leaves a dull or shiny skin. Thus, for example, 'Untitled', 1959 (no.14) is as crusty as 'Wedding Picture', 1961 (no.22) is lush, while the single pasty swipe of the palette knife in 'Untitled', 1961 (no.24) anticipates in its unrevised application the continuous pulled brushstrokes of a few years later.

Altogether, the range of the effects achieved with these means is astonishing. Gritty or silky, feathery or caked, tight-woven or unravelling, each work's surface, like its particular cast of white and particular chromatic undertones or accents, is unique, and each is immensely sensuous. Even at their most arid, Ryman's surfaces recall his affinity to Matisse, who often applied his colours in brittle turpentine-thinned washes. Matisse's manner of letting these fragile surfaces breathe visually by leaving irregular blank gaps between filled-in areas and around lines, also found its way into Ryman's approach. Attention to his more severe works of the 1970s, at the expense of what came before, accounts in part for an all-too-pervasive belief that Ryman, preoccupied by intellectual concerns, has actively denied or is simply insensitive to aesthetic pleasures. One critic thus uncomprehendingly disparaged his later systematic paintings as the 'polemical' exercises of an artist bereft of

'natural' talent for the medium. The austere, fine-tuned techniques of Ryman's mid-career all have their source, however, in this original unleashing of painterly instinct.

Around 1961, Ryman began to separate the various layers and physical properties combined in his early paintings. The greyish gesso washes that had been his first step after sealing the raw canvas became the space-

defining clouds of tone already mentioned in reference to 'A painting of twelve strokes..', 1961 (no.21).

There, white hyphens sit starkly on the pale ground, with the lack of transition between the unctuous paste and the desiccated gesso giving extra definition to each. All but obliterating the gesso in 'An all white painting.., 1961 (no.25), a smooth oil coat of a type new to his work lends the interior of a linen sheet the uniformity of a porcelain tile, while drawing attention to the hatch-like fringe of threads on its left, and the selvage on the right.

Of the smaller works of the early 196os, many are on unstretched canvas. It is common for artists to do studies on canvas scraps, but in making these paintings - which are not studies - Ryman considered the weave, the part of the roll from which they were cut and the various ways they responded to pigment as factors crucial to the paintings' composition. Like the frayed and sewn edges previously noted, the double red thread that often binds yard goods is an integral part of the work; a linear element made permissible to Ryman by being inherent in the materials. Coagulating paint buckles the surface of 'Untitled', 1962 (no.28) and irregularly contracts the fabric square, scalloping a bottom edge that is in effect overscored by the 'found drawing' of two red threads. The precedent for this

"stitching' in Ryman's work can be seen in 'Untitled', 1961 (no.20), an oil on Bristol board where the whole bottom and left margins have been dotted with paint squeezed directly from an uncapped tube. In the years 1960-2 Agnes Martin made a series of comparably sized paintings on linen in which she too left an unpainted canvas margin framed by thin bars or lines. Martin's works were stretched, however, and had an ethereal touch quite at odds with the bluntness of Ryman's; hers were intimations of a more perfect order, his the product of physical interactions. Extrapolating from these paintings, Ryman made a number of drawings of which 'Stretched Drawing', 1963 (no.31) is an example. For these he drew with different tools on various stretched textiles - in this case with charcoal on cotton - unstretched them on completing the drawing, and then restretched them until the original regularity of the matrix was restored, in the process demonstrating the pliability and graphic fragility of the 'rigid' image.

The last full burst of painterly colour in Ryman's work occurred in 1962.

Beneath the buttery white curls that pattern the expanse of 'Untitled' (no.29) and

'Untitled' (no.30), and several similar works, are equally dense flourishes of saturated reds, blues, violets, ochres, and greens. For the next few years Ryman unsuccessfully attempted a series of gridded variants on this approach; he emerged at the end with a body of work cleansed of the decorative qualities that obscured his primary engagement with systematic mark-making, overtly structured formats and the tactilely as well as optically determined distribution of paint.

Before the present exhibition, few people in the United States have been in a position to directly evaluate Ryman's work, particularly its early stages. Europeans have fared better, as they generally have with minimalist and post-minimalist artists of his generation. Over the last twenty years, mid-career shows in Holland, England, France and Switzerland have offered more coherent summaries than anything attempted in the United States. As a result Ryman is far better known and more highly regarded abroad than in his own country. 30

Another consequence of this obscurity is the tendency, even among some sup-porters, to downgrade Ryman's pre-1965 work31 The artist himself dates his maturity from mid-decade, recalling that one day in 1965 I felt I had just finished being a student. I felt very confident. I felt I knew exactly what to do. There was no hesitation, no more doubt. 32 Little hesitancy can be found in his first decade's output, however. Instead, between 1955 and 1962 one witnesses a steady production distinguished by clear formal intent and spontaneous facture. Whatever doubts he entertained - and self-doubt is the occupational hazard of any serious artist, young or old - Ryman's hands-on confidence protected the work against them. Doubt was never the content of his work, as it was in the case of so many first and second generation Abstract Expressionists. For Ryman the first half of the 196os were difficult times for other reasons. 'Pop was certainly the dominant avant-garde movement in painting in the early ' 6os', he once explained. 'All other approaches to painting were not considered. In fact painting was pronounced dead several times. A lot of lesser-known Abstract Expressionists, and there were a lot, did not know what to do. It was a shock thing.

Many painters stopped painting and turned to sculpture because they felt they could not continue with the approach that they had been involved with. They felt that sculpture offered more of a way to further the problems that they had been involved with. I felt very much alone in those years. Even though some people may have liked my painting, they didn't know what to do with it because it was not really the correct thing - it didn't fit. Sometimes

I myself couldn't see where it was going to lead...'33 In short, pictorial painting had returned as the vanguard style, temporarily shoving abstract art aside, and driving some of its practitioners to other media.

The supposed influence of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg on Ryman warrants mentioning at this point only because there was none. On more than one occasion, however, Rauschenberg's one-colour paintings of 1951-2 have been cited as precedents for Ryman's 'all white' paintings of several years later. This assumption is born of twenty-twenty critical hindsight and the curious belief that working artists are omniscient spectators of art history, as well as its busily preoccupied creators. 3* In general, though, artists only remember the things they can use at a given moment, and Ryman, who was then still a musician, does not recall having seen Rauschenberg's black and white paintings when they were shown at the Stable Gallery in 1953. (Since Ryman is absolutely candid about his early experience of and admiration for other artists there is no reason to suspect a selective memory in this or any other instance.) Furthermore, Rauschenberg's involvement with monochrome was brief and inspired by contingency: the black paintings represent an urban archeology of surfaces; the white paintings hold up an opaque mirror to human movement. Concepts projected onto canvas, Rau-schenberg's experiments roughly correspond in that regard to the white 'achrome' reliefs Pietro Manzoni made between 1957 and 1963 and the monochrome paintings Yves Klein made between 1950 and 1962. Ryman was a stranger to all such neo-Dada stratagems.

Parallels between Ryman and Johns are more interesting, despite the lack of actual interchange. Once again, critical comparisons have tended to be superficially

'stylistic', and are usually based on a crude correlation between Ryman's generally even patching of strokes and Johns's patterned gesture, the latter being suggested as the 'obvious' source for the former. Although Johns's earliest distinctive work dates

- like Ryman's - to 1955, Johns didn't begin to show until 1957, by which time Ryman's fundamental vocabulary had already expressed itself in small caseins and oils. Notably, the use of bold lettering as a key compositional element appears in Ryman's work of 1957, just a year after it does in Johns's 'Gray Alphabets' of 1956.

Indeed the most striking thing about Ryman's and Johns's independent development is their congruence. Both men were born in 1930; both were

raised in the South without significant youthful exposure to art; both settled in New York in the early 1950s, just as Abstract Expressionism became dominant. And, in that context, both looked at painting as something to be started from scratch. John's famous ars poetica 'Take an object, do something to it. Do something else to it' even accords in some basic ways with Ryman's step-by-step simplification of painterly craft and syntax. Johns's disciplined 'I do this, I do that' sensibility and Ryman's 'take a brush, take a canvas, take some paint' procedure in turn anticipate an artistic sea change exemplified in the 1970s by Richard Serra's list of the sculptural verbs he intended to put into practice, to roll, to crease, to fold, to store' 35 Between Ryman's attitudes and Johns's there is a crucial disparity, however. Whereas the

'something' Johns initially took was almost always an image or thing-as-image, the 'something' Ryman took was art supplies. And whereas Johns explored the discrepancy between symbol and expressive means, Ryman asserted the literal identity of sign and substance by insisting that the image of painting is first and finally paint itself.

The advent of minimal and conceptual art in the mid-1 96os created the climate in which public attention finally fell on Ryman, but that circumstance has slanted perceptions of his work. Minimalism never existed as a cohesive or self-conscious movement. Nor did the alternative rubrics - Specific Objects, Primary Structures, ABC Art, Systems Art - adequately define the phenomenon 36 Nevertheless, one can speak of a pervasive tendency toward formal severity, serial production, and impersonal facture if not outright manufacture. The primary spokespersons for this tendency - which for want of a better label I will still call minimalism - were theorist-practitioners Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt. Insofar as all of them were object-makers, minimal art was widely perceived as more of a three-dimensional than two-dimensional project, even though LeWitt's frame of reference was primarily conceptual, hence fundamentally non-dimensional. By and large, its advocates had little use for painting. In 1965, Judd asserted that 'half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture', thereby echoing Ryman's previously quoted description of the dilemma painters then confronted. Neither then nor since has Ryman's own work qualified for that 'in between' status, however: regardless of how much relief it has taken on or how much hardware has gone into it, paint and its light-responsive properties remain his principal concern.

Ryman's relation to LeWitt was personal and significant. Briefly Ryman's coworker at the Modern and for many years a close friend, LeWitt shared his belief in the aesthetic promise of obvious propositions patiently articulated. 38 They parted company over the issue of realization. LeWitt was a literalist in his way, believing that aesthetic concepts needn't necessarily be rendered physically. Nor did he think it important whether the artist makes his or her own work or not. Ryman was also a literalist, but in his way; painting, he affirmed, was a strictly visual art - everything you could see mattered, nothing you couldn't see did - and the artist was the sole agent for making the work 'visible'. Accordingly, he rejected the subcontracted fabrication that was essential to minimalist sculpture, as he did LeWitt's notion that ideas were machines for making art. These factors distinguish Ryman's aesthetic from minimalism and conceptualism, although changes in taste brought about by those currents opened his way professionally. 4o

This said, starting in 1965 Ryman did pursue avenues parallel to those travelled by the minimalists, whose hallmarks are routinized handwork, modular formats and programmatic production. The 'Winsor' paintings and related works of that year inaugurate that series of series, All the 'Winsor' works were executed on sized but unprimed linen with the same brand of cool white Winsor & Newton oil pigment that lends its name to the group. The smaller, untitled paintings are nine to ten inches square, and the larger titled ones run to six and a half feet square. The structure of each results from the tiered addition of strokes pulled across the canvas in close-knit formation, leaving the warm brown of the canvas showing between the strokes, all around the margin, and wherever the paint skips. The size of brush employed varies, affecting the compositional density of the painting relative to the dimensions of its support. The Winsors' properly speaking were done with a two inch brush that could cover about six to ten inches before running out (no.36).

Dragged over the dry tooth of the fabric, the opaque white paste leaves a crackling or clotted edge, horizontal bristle tracks, and at the point where it overlaps with the next stroke there is often a thick crest. In 'Mayco' and 'Twin' (both of 1966, nos. 37,

38), Ryman followed the same procedure but employed a specially made twelve-inch-wide brush and thinner, smoother paint, so that the grain would be finer, and the white could be pulled all the way from one side to the other without reloading.

The painterly field that results is extraordinarily active. Tripping on the lateral striations in the paint as it would in much magnified fashion off the louvres of a white venetian blind, light vibrates at an intense pitch. Where the paint is thickest, it creates reflective hot-spots and small contrasting shadows; where strokes merge in a upright seam an irregular counter-rhythm to the horizontal segments catches the eye so that the whole painting becomes a sliding grid of stiff white ribbons laid end to end.

Inevitably, the 'Winsors' summon to mind Frank Stella's 'Black Paintings' of

1959. Still a guard at The Museum of Modern Art in 1960 when the Stellas were first shown in Dorothy Miller's Sixteen Americans, Ryman was impressed by what he saw. 'A lot of the artists didn't like those at all. They thought 'This is ridiculous'. I thought they were good paintings. I didn't really know exactly what it was about, but I thought they were okay.'* Ryman was already acutely conscious of making paint look as good on a painting as it did in the tube, to paraphrase Stella's clever dictum.+ When, in 1965, Ryman adopted a method similar to the one employed in the 'Black Paintings', his choice of a different paint and application substantially altered the results. These differences in technical approach define their basic aesthetic differences as well. Stella is a theoretically inclined formalist; Ryman is a lyrical pragmatist. Ultimately, that is to say, all Stella's efforts come down to the pursuit of pictorial invention; for him painting as an art exists in order to make form. That is its reason for being, and each individual painting is a demonstration of the spatial equations that govern painting as a historical endeavour. For Ryman, the art of painting is a search for particulars and distinctions; accordingly, composition is an experiment in the behavior of the medium and its sensory effect. Working hypotheses serve the painter but painting defies analysis, and its existence is defined only by the way of being of unique examples. Stella tries to make things happen to painting;

Ryman paints in order to see things happen. In his 'Black Paintings' - and the later aluminium and copper ones - Stella adumbrated a total conformity of gesture and frame. There are neither subtleties of stroke, nor loose ends that matter, and each work in the series is obviously different in design. In the 'Winsors' Ryman sets his course, monitors the distribution of pigment and discovers in the brush tracks the structure of concentration and the fascination of random incident. All the works in the series have the same design; each depends for its identity on minor shifts in painterly emphasis.

Asked to explain his works' meaning, Stella replied What you see is what you see' 43 The 'Black Paintings' illustrate that principle.* Ryman too has said

that painting is about what you can see, but in his case the act of seeing connects the eye to instinct and affect as well as intellect. At this point, Ryman's other enthusiasms enter into play. Small paintings with the wide, waxing lozenges and large ones such as Mayco', 1966 (no.37) are clearly informed by Ryman's study of Rothko. Yet, rather than evoke a diffuse and remote 'sublime', the white lozenges in Ryman's paintings mate hypnotic luminosity and tactile immediacy. Standing in front of them, the viewer is at once drawn toward and held in place by the surface of these paintings. Their radiance releases the spirit, but the spirit remembers its body and takes satisfaction in the tangible proportions the body registers.

The 'Standards' of 1967 mark a breakthrough for Ryman on two fronts.*s Departing from traditional canvas or paper supports for the first time, he painted them on metal, and their prompt exhibition at the Paul Bianchini Gallery in New York that year was his first one-person show. 4 Ryman eventually recognized that a group of paintings he had originally conceived of as related but individual works was in reality a single multi-part entity. The misfortune of selling none of the panels during the show resulted in the good fortune of keeping them together. In its definitive presentation, the 'Standards' comprises 13 four by four foot squares of cold rolled steel loosely swabbed with enamel. To arrive at this number, Ryman painted some fifty such sheets, pulling a three inch brushstroke across them after chemically rinsing and preparing the surface of each so that the slippery paint would adhere. When errors occurred or the sweep of the brush lost its intensity, he destroyed the painting and started again, a reminder that the appearance of ease Ryman strives for in the finished work is far from easily achieved. One might compare the challenge he faced to that of a cellist, who in order to sustain a note, must maintain a constant pressure on the strings of the instrument as the bow arm moves back and forth across the bridge. Intended modulations of tone result from relaxing or increasing that pressure, while inadvertent ones happen when a string binds or the arm slackens its control. To the untrained ear, the difference in sound may be negligible, just as to the casual eye the proper spreading of enamel might be hard to distinguish stroke by stroke, but, as with the flow of musical notes, the overall feel of paintings like the 'Standards' depends upon such fluctuating exac-titude. Even when the enamel is opaque as it is in related works on aluminium like

'Untitled', 1973 (no.54), the one-time-only traversal of the surface is essential to the painting's effect.

The corrugated-paper paintings such as 'VII, 1969 (no.42) are similar in their fuidity to these works on metal, although the paint used was Enamelac, a flat white pigmented shellac primer, and the gesture was an oblique scumble extended in rows over several panels. Ryman then divided the five by five foot units into a number of subgroups composed of four, five, and seven parts displayed side by side. 'I preferred the odd numbers,' he said, 'because you had a panel in the center with an odd number. The wall became the center with the even-numbered panels.47 For the generation-defining Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1969, which presented his work along with that of Philip Glass, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Richard Tuttle among others, Ryman assembled nine of these panels into a square. This format was subsequently broken back down into its horizontal layout and never reconstituted. This square configuration had been used for another suite of multi-part paintings from the previous year, named the 'Classicos', after the brand of paper on which they were done. Typical of the series, 'Classico 5', 1968 (no.41) is made of a dozen vertically orientated sheets taped to the wall three high and four across to create a horizontal composite that is partially covered with a synthetic polymer white. Once the paint dried, the masking tape was removed, exposing small rectangles of untouched paper beneath. This semi-regular pattern of notches reinforces the grid of the abutted pieces of paper and the sectional painted shape. In 'Lugano', 1968 (no.40), named after another type of paper, these tape indentations have been omitted and the tilting white blocks spread loosely across the decal-edged matrix. The off-centre positioning of the blocks within the symmetrical framework of 'Lugano' and

'Classico 5', their oblong rectangularity (rare in Ryman's work), and the rain of white droplets that activates the blank bottom of the adjoined sheets (process traces rather than expressive drips), all give these works an internal expansiveness and painterliness unexpected in such a Spartan construct. The tendency of the semigloss white to flutter over and then drop back from the ivory surface of the paper gives these works an equally unexpected depth. As with most of Ryman's work, the recipe could not be more basic. Nor could the variations, involving the nonconcen-tric nesting of rectilinear elements and the wobble of brushed paint and laid-paper edges, be more vivid.

Rounding out this five-year period of work on regular formats are the

'Generals', 1970 (see no.43). Although each of the fifteen paintings has slightly different dimensions, the standard measurement that distinguishes one in the series from the next is among their common characteristics. Thus the largest of the

'Generals' is fifty-five by fifty-five inches, and they decrease in size by approximately half-inch decrements, with the smallest being forty-four by forty-four inches. All feature a bright white square surrounded by a margin of dull exposed primer the width of the unbevelled three-and-a-half-inch wooden bars over which the cotton canvas is stretched. Applying one unsanded coat of enamel over four sanded ones, Ryman created this evenly glossy surface in the middle, framed by the

'matte, dry, kind of dead-looking' finish he valued in the Enamelac underpaint-ing. *8 Because they are fully symmetrical, although not precision-ruled, the paintings have neither tops nor bottoms, neither left nor right sides. Despite their minor differences in size, each canvas in the series may be substituted for any other - after their initial exhibition, the 'Generals' have never again been presented as a group - since every canvas incorporates the same contrast of absorbency and reflectiveness and thereby functions in the same efficient manner as a light-sensitive membrane.

Beginning with the 'Standard' series in 1967, Ryman increasingly experimented with unconventional materials in pursuit of new painting possibilities. Yet whenever the occasion has called for it, he has returned without hesitation to the more traditional means with which he started. The pigments and primer he has used include: oil, oil-based ink, Interference, casein, gouache, Lascaux acrylic, synthetic polymer, gesso, commercial enamels, baked ceramic enamels, Impervo enamel, Enamelac, Gripz, Elvacite, Varathane, vinyl acetate, rabbit skin glue, charcoal, chalk, india ink, ballpoint pen, graphite pencil, coloured pencil, pastel, and silverpoint. For surfaces and supports Ryman has employed newsprint, gauze, Chemex coffee-filter paper, Kraft paper, wallpaper, wax paper, tracing paper, Bristol board, corrugated cardboard, handmade rag papers, cotton duck, linen, jute, Featherboard, plywood, hollow-core panels, polystyrene fabric, Plexiglas, Mylar, vinyl, Acrylivin, Gator board, fibreplate, fibreglass mesh, honeycomb fibreglass panels, Lumasite, anodized aluminium, cold-rolled steel, copper, plaster walls. For fasteners he has turned to masking tape, plastic straps, plastic stripping, staples, steel screws, steel flanges, steel pressure plates, aluminium tubing, and various other metal fixtures. The variety of

substances and supports on this list is already astonishing and it is constantly being augmented.* Given the fact that for some artists materials have expressive connotations or intrinsic virtues associated with either tradition or novelty, it is worth noting the unbiased deliberateness with which Ryman may choose between canvas and an industrial product like Gator board, ballpoint or silverpoint, the latter the preferred graphic tool of Renaissance draftsmen like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

Every material, Ryman argues, has 'a built-in code', or way of 'reacting', that suits or ill-suits it for a given purpose.° The choice of media thus preconditions aesthetic opportunity. Criteria for selection vary from the quality of light that bounces off a specific pigment or surface, to that surface's chromatic cast, to its pliability or that of the substance covering it. Charcoal pencil's particulate residue was appropriate to the coarse and relatively stiff weave of cotton used for 'Stretched Drawing', 1963 (no.31), but ballpoint-pen ink was the only graphic medium sufficiently elastic to adhere well to the polyester cloth used for another group of such drawings. Ryman occasionally savours the unlikeliness of a particular mix of ingredients, once confessing that he had set about making one piece because 'it would allow me to have paper and plastic and metal, which is kind of a strange combination for painting' 51 Exotic conjunctions of materials are rarely the trigger for ideas, however. Usually, expeditions to specialty hardware and paint stores come after a work has taken basic form in his imagination.

Just as the 'Classicos' were named after the stock on which they were painted, other works may have been called 'Allied' after a trucking firm, or 'Capitol' after a steel supplier, 'Acme' after a hardware store, or 'General' after a lumber company. 52 Ryman prefers the concept of 'naming' to that of 'titling', since the former designates a work while the latter suggests a theme. (Seldom has he named a piece unless it was leaving the studio for exhibition, which explains why so many early works are still listed as 'Untitled.) Some critics have misconstrued the names the artist has assigned paintings as proof of his latent mysticism. But the lofty names he has sometimes used are those commerce has given itself and Ryman's appropriation of them is evidence of his humour rather than of his hermeticism. At very least, Ryman is having fun with the ambiguity. Otherwise, these 'found' names are in keeping with an earlier method of identifying works by description - for example, two 1961 pieces called 'A painting of twelve strokes measuring 114" X 112" and signed at the bottom right-hand corner' and 'An all white painting measuring 9" X 10" and signed

twice on the left side in umber' (nos.21, 25) - and a way of insisting on the work's objective origins. 53

A technical innovator, Ryman is not an art technician in the sense expressed by the kinetic gimmickry of the 1960s or, on a higher plane, by the machine-age aesthetics of the Constructivists. Reluctant to place undue emphasis on studio practice, he nonetheless views the options presently confronting painters as challenges to artistic invention on a par with the introduction of oil pigments in the Renaissance. 'A painting begins with materials [and] there are many more mat erials now available to painters compared to earlier times. He has to make decisions as to how to use them and what combination of materials to use depending on what result he wants to achieve. People are taught to see painting in a certain way, a way that seems correct. Although there is a basis for this correctness through the history of painting, each painter's way of seeing is from a different perspective and it's part of the painter's task to expand our "way" of seeing to the furthest limits of the painter's vision.'54

Closer to the usual tenor of Ryman's thinking on the subject is this deadpan recollection of his introduction to the European scene.

In the fall of 1968 I did my first show at Konrad Fischer's Gallery in Düsseldorf. The exhibition consisted of six paintings on paper panels, nine panels to a painting. The panels were crated and shipped to Düsseldorf. In the process of getting them through customs (in order to avoid the duty that is paid on the 'Art' arriving in the country) Konrad had listed them as paper' and not as paintings. But the customs official said But? It is expensive paper (handmade) so you will have to pay so much!' 'Yes, it is expensive paper,' Konrad said, 'but it has been used.' The customs official agreed that it had been used. So the paintings arrived designated as 'Used Paper.' 'Since that time I have wondered about the possibility of paintings being defined as 'Used Paint'. Then there would be 'Used Bronze,' 'Used Canvas, 'Used Steel,' 'Used Lead', ss

Such a matter-of-fact attitude wonderfully demystifies art's physical reality.

Whether applied to a Matisse, a Rothko, a Ryman or a work by any other artist - thinking about a Velázquez as 'used paint' certainly sharpens the eye - the effect of this levelling adjective, far from diminishing mastery, makes the particular 'use' of paint by such artists all the more evidently individual and remarkable.

A primary impetus for Ryman's recourse to metal plates was the desire for a self-supporting surface that would hug the wall. Having dealt extensively with the edge of stretched canvas, Ryman turned his attention to steel and aluminium because they all but removed the edge and collapsed the visual distance between the painted plane of the work and the painted plane that was its architectural foil.

An alternative solution to the same problem of a similar date can be found in works such as 'Adelphi', 1967 (no.39). Enlarging upon his small unstretched canvases of 1961 and 1962, Ryman stapled unstretched canvas directly to the wall, and framed it with blue-chalked snap-lines, masking tape, and strips of wax paper. Pushing the issue a step further in the 'Prototypes'

(1969-70), Ryman affixed thin plastic

squares to the wall with four tape hinges and then painted the sheets with polymer white, allowing the stroke to spill over: when dry, the excess paint held the thin, almost weightless panel to the wall after the tape was torn away. Last in this procedural sequence were a number of impermanent paintings, one important group of which was made for Using Walls, an exhibition held at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1970. For that occasion, Ryman laid out a series of masking tape squares and applied his brush directly onto the wall inside them, making sure that it occasionally swiped the tape so as to activate the zone between the painted and unpainted wall, thus handling the once-virgin margin in these flat walls much as he had the sides of stretched canvases. For the Rooms P.S. 1 show of 1976, Ryman pasted similarly scaled sheets of paper onto the chipped wall of a classroom in an abandoned public school turned Kunsthalle. It is a rare instance of his working in a 'found space' rather than a conventional studio or gallery.

Two other important series belong to this period. One, completed in 1973, consists of five suites of enamel on copper paintings. Unlike with previous works on metal, Ryman left large areas of the copper exposed and oxidized them, bringing out a range of hues from an almost black green to a richly mottled orange.

'Untitled', 1973 (no.52) is an example of the first kind, 'Untitled', 1973 (no.53), the unique instance of the second. The bleeding bluish-green edges of the glassy white square accent the colour of the ground, an effect resulting from baking the ceramic enamel at high temperatures.

These paintings mark the first time in

Ryman's work that visual density is matched by a sensation of physical weight.

The last series of this period to be discussed was not the last to be undertaken.

The 'Surface Veils' (1970-2) were painted at the midpoint between the 'Standards' and the later wall works. However, the importance of the series and the wide range of scale and different types of facture encompassed within it, account for speaking of them out of chronological order. But for their collective name, the 'Surface Veils' might be considered not a single group, but two related ones. The first consists of oils on fibreglass mesh (nos.44-8). A light, fragile material, the loose weave and amber hue of the fibreglass set off the white opacity of the paint, although the paint's tendency to seep into its porous support engenders delicate halftones and textural nuances. Many of the small 'Surface Veils' have taped wax-paper underpinnings to prevent the paint from soaking through the mesh and sticking to the wall. To that extent they resemble 'Adelphi' (no.39) with its waxed-paper margins.

But in the small 'Surface Veils', the waxed paper is less a framing device around the painting than a pictorial ground. The most complex of these, 'Surface Veil', 1970 (no.46) and 'Surface Veil 4', 1970-1 (no.48), feature overlapping wax-paper Sheets and pattern of a torn lengths of tape that create a sequence of vertical spaces and tabs which one reads in relation to the centred fibreglass sheet and the white squarish shape tipped inside it. In their artfully economical fusion of structure and image, these are among the most beautiful paintings Ryman has ever made and may be compared with his friend Eva Hesse's fibreglass, cheesecloth, and latex

'Contingent', 1969 (Australian National Gallery, Canberra). Compact without bulk or depth, tonally rich without spectral colour, each is a sandwich of superimposed and surrounding spaces, of the wafer-thin intervals separating their floating layers, and of lateral planar intervals between the edge of one surface and the next.

These smaller 'Surface Veils', photographed in clusters on Ryman's studio wall just after their creation, were apparently conceived less as a formal series than as a constellation of unique albeit closely related pieces. By contrast, the four large

'Surface Veils' numbered I to lV are a series. Identical in their twelve by twelve foot size, all are painted in oil with short washy strokes (nos.49-5 1).

Circumscribing them are traces of a blue chalk line the artist laid down to guide him as he filled in the unstretched canvas, since they were stretched only after completion. The overlapping or unpainted seams that define these works' inner structure - like those that appear also in several smaller fibreglass versions - originate in the changes in direction of the artist's gesture, which coincided with the beginning and end of successive working sessions. Traditional fresco also depends upon covering large areas over extended periods, and such divisions are part of the process, but in fresco they are disguised by the continuity of the forms depicted. In Ryman's 'naked'

painting, however, the joined sections are plain to see and, by positive default, they become the image. Unevenly contoured in 'Surface Veil l' and 'Surface Veil II', these oblique planes flicker at the edges and seem to adjust themselves against each other and the outlined square. In 'Surface Veil II', with the open suture running horizontally above the middle of the painting, Ryman's ranked vertical marks are more regular, conforming to an even bar pattern reprised in 'Surface Veil IV' (private collection), and further refined and modified in nonserial paintings of the same period such as 'Paragon', 1972 (Crex Collection, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schafthausen),

'Empire', and 'Capitol', both 1973 (Soloman R. Guggenheim

Museum, New York). Drawn forward by their delicately agitated surfaces, one easily loses one's bearings in the towering breadth of the large 'Surface Veils'.

When one steps back to retrieve a sense of external physical scale, however, the internal textures dissolve into a vibrant haze, yet because of the paintings' squareness, this sense of atmospheric expanse never evokes the landscape sublime. 56

Ryman was prompted to make the fibreglass 'Surface Veil' works by a desire to paint on something as close to nothing as possible, yet the tactility and tints of the filament only confirmed his conviction that nothing seen in a painting is extraneous to it. The artist's ambition just to 'paint the paint has nonetheless persisted. I guess if you go into outer space,' he once speculated, 'and paint without gravity, it would be quite amazing. You could do something very clear without any problems

- and it would stay together right where you put it, and it would float around and you could see the front and the back and the edge and it would all make sense.'57 Beguiling as it is, this fantasy deviates from Ryman's belief that not

only does everything that contributes to a painting count but that all that impinges on or responds to its presence matters too. In short, paint's inner space is always dependent on its 'outer space'. Otherwise a work of art reverts to being a mere coincidence of used materials instead of a full synthesis of them. Context does more than focus content, therefore; it completes it. My paintings don't really exist unless they're on the wall as a part of the wall, as a part of the room. Once it's down from the wall. the painting is not alive. '58

Ryman is quick to point out, however, that 'I don't do site-specific paintings. A painting can go different places - in fact I like that.'» Changes in location do not alter a painting's character so much as reveal it in all its essential detail and contingent attributes. (As do changes in vantage point. Whatever its depth or shallowness or relative size, a Ryman painting is meant be examined from every angle and every distance; no single view suffices to take it all in.) Only those situations that deprive a painting of sufficient illumination or breathing room hamper perception of its singular nature; in those cases it ceases to 'exist', in Ryman's terms, just as if it had been removed from the wall.

Usually Ryman's work has been hung in the standard type of modern gallery, known generically as the White Cube;60 often he has had a hand in designing the installation. During its brief history, the White Cube has come to stand for many things, and is consequently the topic of much debate as well as the target of angry denunciation. 2 To some it represents a longed-for detachment from the world, and to others is damnable for precisely that reason. Its appropriateness to a given kind of work - and its inappropriateness as well - may, nevertheless, hinge on strictly practical artistic criteria. In Ryman's case certainly, the attraction of the White Cube inheres in a straightforward extension of the principle of perceptual neutrality embodied in the white paint he uses. Of course, the kind of uncluttered space his paintings require is the exception to normal urban congestion. But if such emptiness is a contemporary luxury, it is a luxury Ryman democratically invites the public at large to experience. And he intends that space to be as unencumbered by specific metaphysical or political connotations as it is devoid of competing physical objects. Ryman's work is therefore a conditioned but conscious response to a set of prevailing cultural conventions rather than an endorsement of any broad philosophical principle of exclusion. In another society with different conventions of design, the challenge of making paintings that fuse with and react to their environment would give rise to a very different set of answers. As intriguing

a basis for speculation about new artistic forms as that prospect is, however, it is not a valid basis for second-guessing Ryman's achievement in respect to what he has always treated as a working rather than symbolic context.

Far from contriving images of an ideal alternative to reality, Ryman is dedicated to making paintings that insist upon their own reality and on that of everything in their proximity. Dissatisfied with the various labels applied to the painterly genre he practices - Absolute, Non-Objective, Concrete, Aniconic - Ryman prefers to call himself a Realist. Realism, as he understands it, is equally distinct from representational art and abstraction 63 'Representation is illusion', he argues.

'The aesthetic is

an inward aesthetic, it's as if the painting had its own little world and you look into it. '64 Although abstraction partially or wholly banishes figurative or spatial illusion, in Ryman's view it nonetheless preserves representation's flaw by confining itself to the little world' within the frame. In both instances, he observes, 'the frame is there for good reason, to focus the eye into the picture. 6 By abandoning the frame, painting opens itself up to its environment. 'With Realism the aesthetic is an outward aesthetic instead of an inward aesthetic, since there's no picture, there's no story. And there's no myth. And there's no illusion, above all. So lines are real, the space is real, the surface is real, and there's interaction between the painting and the wall plane unlike abstraction and representation. 6 The artist's preoccupation with that interaction has determined virtually everything he has done, and has distinguished him from all other painters of his day. Ryman's oeuvre is the large result of that devotion to his own version of what Cézanne called 'my little sensation'.

In his ingenious polemic against minimalism, 'Art and Objecthood', Michael Fried argued that formalist painting and sculpture were predicated on their self-containment - everything necessary to them was complete and constant within the painted or plastic framework - whereas minimalist art could only be experienced as a dramatic presence within an expanded and controlled context. By approaching the conventions of theatre, such art, Fried thought, betrayed its intrinsic nature as painting or sculpture. Ryman in essence agrees with Fried on his limited premise - formalist painting does depend on its enclosure - but disagrees with his conclusion that by acknowledging its situation, painting becomes something else. Quite the opposite; that acknowledgment releases painting from its pictorial bonds - if one were to turn the theatrical analogy around, it eliminates the proscenium arch of the

frame - and allows painting to assert its own identity more fully. Writing in 1970, Mel Bochner spelled out the broader implications of the issue, linking Ryman's concerns with those of process sculptors, environmental artists, and practitioners of other post-minimalist modes:

Perception is geared to cancel out whatever is stray or unaccountable.

'Background' is characterized negatively as unclear, indistinct, and non-articulated. But background is neither margin nor fringe nor the implicit. It is only through the function of its 'opening out' that we are presented with a passage to the density of things.68

Articulate objects in clearly articulated settings, Ryman's paintings open up their inner space and 'open out' the background, even as that widening field of vision focuses back on their internal syntax.

The fasteners Ryman regularly incorporated into his work from 1976 are emphatically real points of contact between painting figure and environmental ground.

Resembling the masking tape patches which they supplanted, these fasteners are a bridge to the wall - and back. Among the first works where they appear is 'Embassy I', 1976 (no.55) in which their dual function becomes explicit: besides attaching the work to the wall, they serve as spatial punctuation marks. In 'Untitled Draw-ing, 1976 (no.56) and 'Untitled', 1976 (no.58) they are connected by fine pencil lines that also block out areas in their immediate vicinity.

Strictly speaking these pastels and pencil on Plexiglas works are drawings. The deciding factor, for Ryman, is the presence of line rather than the media employed or the support - paintings on paper are paintings not drawings. With the exception of dates and signatures, graphic line never appears in his painting; where one is necessary to a composition it is supplied by the edge of another element. For instance, the abutting of the two panels of 'Untitled', 1960 (no.15) creates the hard vertical approached by the soft border of the painted area to the left. Comparison of this work with Newman's 'Stations of the Cross' (1958-66) is instructive.

Whether clean or fuzzy, Newman's 'zips' are placed on the blank field in such a way that one must deny their sometimes perfunctory physicality in order to gain access to the optical space they bracket. To that extent, delineation in Newman still involves residual illusion or at least the expectation that one will agree to see things as they were meant to be seen rather than as they

are. Ambiguity of this kind is incompatible with Ryman's 'Realism'. Instead of suggesting anything or reinforcing any other element, lines only serve their own end, which is to travel from here to there. They may be rigid as in 'Catalyst II', 1985 (n0.68) or flowing as in

'Spectrum II', 1984 (no.67) or Courier I', 1985 (no.69). In either case, line is not a spatial artifice for defining the areas that fall on its either side, but an actual space within which a given material has been channelled.

The fasteners vary greatly from painting to painting in their physical prominence and hence in their compositional importance. Although jet black, the bolted pressure plates in 'Embassy I', 1976 (no.55) scarcely extend beyond the edge of the Plexiglas square they pin to the wall. 'Phoenix', 1979 (no.60), however, features four one and a half inch metal tabs that move the attaching screws well away from the work's handkerchief-size central plane. Cut from the same plate as the rest of the painting, these strips are visibly of a piece with it, despite their eccentric elongation and the sharp line created where the thick layer of paint covering the central square stops short of them. 'Advance', 1976 (no.57), by contrast, is held in place by clear plastic straps that pass over the front of the painted white square. As thin as these paintings and their attachments are, the sides are active elements; thus the bluish edges of the vinyl straps in 'Advance' are a significant colour element, just as the bluish aura in the ceramic whites are in Ryman's baked enamel on copper pieces, or the red, blue, and black tints of the Acrylivin support are in other works. Likewise, the wooden inlays, staining, or epoxy caulking that Ryman uses to edge his fibreglass panel works add important accents to the overall design, as does the shape of a screw's head in other flush-mounted works, or the natural tint of metal used to make them, or the kind of paint with which they have been retouched.

Large canvases of this period were frequently cantilevered off the wall with bent steel plates or segments of boxy aluminium tubing. Usually these were mitre-cut at the end, introducing four diagonal grace notes into otherwise consistently squared-off compositions. By 1982 the industrial look of Ryman's fixtures seem to have infused all other aspects of paintings such as 'Crown' 1982 (no.63),

'Access' (no.64) and 'Range' (no.65), both 1983. The bulk of these paintings, which may seem hard and overbuilt at first glance, is relieved by the shimmer of light on the brushed metal, the glaucous glow of the fibreglass and the waivering Enamelac ribbon that meanders along the squares' outer edges, occasionally turning unexpected corners inward or doubling back over

itself. In these paintings, as throughout Ryman's work, extremes of strength and delicacy meet and are miraculously confounded. The thinnest of synthetic supports or most dilute of commercial paints may possess the greatest durability, and the heaviest of armatures scintillate with an evanescent light. Recognition of these latent properties contributes not only to our fascination with these paintings as formal inventions; it is also essential to their emotional aura, as is the unexpected and unifying discovery of any quality in its apparent opposite.

At the other extreme, Ryman's metal and fibreglass plate paintings of 1985-6 are mounted with ordinary screws. Among the most elegant of these is 'Adminis-trator', 1985 (no.71), with its blank white interior, thin black border, and asymmetrically spaced screw heads and perforations. As in many other works, the pairing and spacing of these points suggest lines that might but do not actually run between them. The accumulation of those imaginary lines creates a template, or grid. In the mind's eye one can trace armatures over the blank interior of 'Adminis-trator' and, by dropping this or that potential coordinate out of one's mental picture, endlessly restructure the painting. 'Administrator' and similar paintings are like a Mondrian whose internal spatial divisions have been erased leaving only a series of marginal ellipses marking opposite ends of the bars which formed that structure.

Sparest of all the group is 'Expander', 1985 (no.70). Brushed with a suave milky white, this comparatively small work is bolted down at four points about halfway between the middle of the plate and its quadrilateral rim. Previously peripheral or subordinate to the field of Ryman's paintings, in this case the fasteners have become the work's focal point. Despite initial appearances, however, the screws are not in line with the square's major coordinates, and the slight asymmetry of their positioning gently destabilizes this most stable of shapes. Pinioned and framed by the crisp black dots, the blank centre of 'Expander' holds, but also shifts its axis as it hovers in front of the contrasting white of the wall.

Around the same year as he made 'Expander', Ryman went back to vertical formats for virtually the first time since 1958. A group of these works were painted on aluminium sheets screwed fush to the wall at top and bottom but folded at eye-level, or just above, in such a way as to project a plane several inches out toward the spectator. Like the thoroughly flat fibreglass variants such as 'Express', 1985 (no.74), these aluminium paintings were then horizontally divided into painted and unpainted zones of unequal proportion. Hans Hofmann's famous concept of 'push-pull' acquires literal dimension in

these works. Tension between the various sections in works such as 'Credential', 1985 (no.73), does not result from the advancing and retreating of saturated hues, as it does in Hofmann's work, but from the optical competition between polished metal surfaces that 'whiten' and come forward under glancing electric light, and painted white surfaces that jut out, only to tuck back in, throwing a shadow that becomes integrated into the composition. If the dynamics of Ryman's pulsing blocks recall Hofmann, their aura inevitably conjures up Rothko as well, although Ryman has seemingly bleached, trimmed, and tacked down Rothko's amorphous clouds of colour. 'Charter', 1985 (Art Institute of Chicago); another of the cantilevered aluminium paintings, subsequently became the key unit in a series that collectively bears its name. Unique in Ryman's production, the 'Charters' were commissioned to be installed together in a single room. Even so they are not site-specific, nor, in the tradition of Mondrian's utopian Salon de Madame B.. Dresden', 1926 (Staatliche Kunstammlungen Dres-den, Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister) were they conceived as elements for a holistic architectural environment. They are much closer to the suite of paintings Rothko made for the Seagram Building, now in the Tate Gallery, or the group housed in the Rothko Chapel in Houston. In both cases Rothko attempted a symphonic grandeur;

Ryman's cycle is pure chamber music.

Not only has Ryman painted for and on walls, his paintings have on occasion simulated them. Commissioned in 1975 to make a work for a villa in Italy, Ryman discovered on arriving at the site, that moisture made it impossible to work with the existing plaster surface. The solution in 'Varese Wall' was to create a freestanding wooden partition safely removed from the seepage. In 1984, Ryman returned to the problem with 'Factor', a strutted rectangle floating parallel to and out from the gallery wall like a display panel. Two other works conceived along the same structural lines were attached at right angles to the wall like buttressed ledges.

Hovering above the floor and supported at the front edge by two slender rods,

'Pace', 1984 (no.66) may strike one as an eccentric modern table. As always, the source of its unusual orientation is forthright speculation - I was thinking about how it would be if a painting was horizontal to the wall rather than being hung vertically, like most painting. " Regardless of how closely his work may approach the status or appearance of another order of physical or aesthetic objects, it remains painting by virtue of the emphasis placed on the

receptivity to light of the painted surface, which in this case is a cool glossy white that looks up at the viewer instead of the viewer looking ahead to it. The improbable rightness of this deft flipping of the paradigms of easel-painting is altogether typical of Ryman's work: the enjoyment it brings is that of something obvious in its strangeness and strange in its revealed obviousness.

Recently, Ryman's flat supports have given way to experiments with bowed surfaces. 'Journal', 1988 (no.76), for example, is composed of two sheets of pliant Lumasite joined in the middle by moulding and pushed away from the wall at the top and bottom by large steel clamps. The central plastic seam running between the two halves bears his signature with the letters widely spaced, so that at a distance they almost look like the separations between the knuckles of a hinge. In keeping with Ryman's basic aesthetic, that seam is simultaneously a functional and a formal element, a point of contact with the wall and a line covered with lines. As one advances toward the painting and the inscription on it becomes legible, one is made aware of the pronounced concavity of the whole structure. Once again, though, the particular form of this relief is dictated not by an interest in novel constructs or materials but by the play of light and shade over its gently enfolding arcs. Like many of his other paintings, 'Journal' reminds one of Ryman's partial affinity with the 'light and space' aesthetic of Robert Irwin, but while Irwin's glimmering saucers flirt with optical illusion, Ryman's squares and rectangles stick to the readily verifiable facts of their making and presentation.

Periodically, Ryman will return to previous ways of doing things to explore the ramifications of a change in procedure. As is normal for a painter of his age and long experience, the reciprocal influence of old ideas on new, and new practices on old has increasingly developed as the crucial dialectic of his work. In Ryman's early work richly hued underpaintings were almost the rule, but they disappeared by the early 196os and were only partially reintroduced later in the decade, for example in the 'Prototypes' (1969-70), where Ryman used a red primer on his support but then buried it beneath the white topcoat. After the mid-1970s, painted grounds became common again - and visible - but sombre colours replaced the deciduous greens, clay browns and mint blues of the past. Umber and earth-red primers were applied to stretched canvas works such as 'Monitor', 1978 (no.59) and to steel-plate paintings such as 'Archive', 1980 (no.61). In both cases, they accentuated the coolness of his whites, the tightness of their overall weave, and the graphic flare of individual strokes that strayed into corners or otherwise untouched areas.

Earlier compositional problems are also revisited in Ryman's recent work. 'Con-text', 1989 (Claude Berri, Paris) is to some extent a reinvestigation of the planar divisions found in the first 'Surface Veils', but the fault lines that separate painted areas in the latter have widened greatly in the former, as if the brushed sections were tectonic plates moving further and further apart. This sense of internal realignments is heightened by the asymmetrical placement of the painting's quite conspicuous wall mounts which gravitate to the left, while the painted areas open to the right. Poised on two wooden rectangles, 'Initial', 1989 (no.77) has the same off-side support as 'Context', but only at the bottom. At the top, the Gator board square is flattened against the wall without visible attachments, placing further emphasis on paired blocks, and the precarious imbalance of the whole. 'Locate', 1989 (no.78) meanwhile reincorporates the stacked bar strokes of Ryman's small unstretched painting of 1961 (no.21) into a larger, more heavily impasted, and now rigid ground.

Like the recent works such as 'Context', Ryman's 'Versions' series of sixteen works involves spaces that seem to be at once opening up and filling in. Unlike so much of the work of the mid-1 98os, however, the 'Versions' are suffused by an overall softness that derives from their pliant fibreglass support, the putty and tin casts of their underpainting, the fineness of the brads that affix them, and the curled, translucent border of wax paper than runs along their upper edge. Big or small - they measure from ninety-one by eighty-four inches to thirteen by thirteen inches - Ryman has treated their painted surface the same way, applying a few cottony tufts of white in several places and then adding to them without any predetermined plan until they swell into shapeless masses that gather and meld as they grow out from their scattered nuclei (nos.79-81). Subtly modulated inter-nally, and mounted with eye-teasing attentiveness to the transition between paint ing and wall, 'Versions VII, 1991 (no.79) revises long-familiar aspects of Ryman's work. Yet a new element, the undercoat of pearlescent paint called Interference, contributes not only to their softness but also to their spatial unpredictability.

Under direct light, Interference takes on a metallic sheen: under indirect light it turns a pinkish tan. 'Versions XVI', 1992 (no.81), one of the small paintings prepared in this manner, shows the reasons for Ryman's interest, for as the light rakes it and the surface gradually undergoes this tonal change, the fibreglass sheet, although flat, appears to curve inward like 'Journal' (no.76) and the woolly whites spread over it start to lift from their optically warping ground. One of several paintings made this way, and one of a great many

more paintings made over the nearly forty years of Ryman's artistic life to date, this work cannot be said to summarize his career. As punctuation to this exhibition and essay, it should therefore be read as a comma or ellipsis rather than a full stop. Still, it embodies the inherent characteristics of every other Ryman painting: no-nonsense intelligence, an appreciation of useful tradition, and a self-refreshing spirit of what if. These essential qualities along with a rare and diffident integrity inform one of the most sustained bodies of work in modern painting - and, for the viewer, one of the most sustaining as well.

III

Writing about Ryman is notoriously difficult. While words may point out formal and painterly subtleties, they can never fully render them. Transcription is not translation. Yet, making such distinctions is of paramount importance in discussing Ryman, given that generalizations about his painting - including those that are truly apt - tend to blur the details that express its life-force, making his work sound like an aesthetic exercise rather than the imaginative pursuit that it is. The first step toward appreciating Ryman, then, is to acknowledge the limits of the language at our disposal and so recognize painting's essential independence from what can be said about it.

The second is to listen carefully to the artist. For that reason Ryman's statements have played a large part in this account of his work. If I have taken him at his word, it is because his word is good, and, in its modest but insistent way, cautionary. In this, I am not unmindful of the dangers of the intentional fallacy; that is, the misleading identification of an artist's conscious aim with his actual accomplish-ment. I am more wary, however, of a series of assumptions basic to much discourse on modern painting, assumptions that, when applied to Ryman, may inhibit the viewer's first-hand experience of the work and direct their thinking into a maze of theoretical conundrums. Ryman's art is especially vulnerable to these digressive intellectual habits which derive in part from criticism's general incapacity to deal simply with simple things. At the extreme, one might even say that modern criticism hates the very clarity that so much modern art aspires to. Otherwise, those problematic assumptions originate in the crisis of formalist criticism in the 1970S.

Symptomatic of that crisis is the abiding obsession such critics have had with the idea of painting's auto-extinction. The apocalyptic tendency to which they collectively belong has several sects; all of which seek to give positive

meaning to the present by forecasting negative scenarios for the future. Justification for this practice has been found in the earliest phases of abstraction's development. Emblematic of the beginnings in which some have divined modernism's end, is Kasimir Male-vich's Suprematist Composition: White on White, 1918 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York). To the majority of the lay public, this is painting at its lowest common denominator and lowest ebb, a reductio ad absurdum of vanguard pretensions, and a bad joke. To the more informed viewer, Malevich's work is an artistic ne plus ultra - or ne minus ultra - only sublime rather than ridiculous in its economy. For some of its admirers schooled in the ideology of the period, more-over, Suprematist Composition: White on White' predicts the demise of easel painting and heralds a new postaesthetic age. Within this community of opinion, the fact that Malevich went back to figuration and so turned away from the glorious future his Suprematist paintings indicated lends the story of Soviet modernism a tragic dimension but does not alter its deterministic message. Meanwhile, all artists who have followed in his footsteps or broken a parallel path have been dogged by the expectation that sooner or later they will reach the end of the line implicit in his work - and stop. Paintings done since then are regarded by those convinced of this inevitable eventuality as poignant symbols of a momentarily cheated fate.

'Suprematist Composition: White on White' is cited as an influence on Ryman in virtually all the literature. In actuality, though, Ryman paid little attention to this particular work which hung at The Museum of Modern Art under his guard-ianship, and even less to the aesthetic doctrine of which it was a talisman. The problem from his point of view was precisely the ingrained symbolism of the piece. 'I had seen Malevich's paintings at the Museum of Modern Art,' he once recalled, 'but really he had no bearing on what I was doing, either in the 5os or the 6os. In fact he was more like a curiosity to me. I thought of him more in terms of Surrealism.' The substitution of the label 'Surrealism' for 'Suprematism' amounts to a Freudian slip at the expense of Suprematism, since in the way Ryman meant it, Malevich's art was basically pictographic, and involved a sur, or beyond, realist representation of ideal form in transcendental space.

Here, as in the case of Rauschenberg or Johns, it is obvious how gross formal comparisons between works can lead to false explanations of their genesis and meaning. The mere existence of a precedent says nothing about its effects, if any, and in this instance it seems that the example Malevich set Ryman concerned what not to think about or do. As Lucy Lippard observed, the myth of definitive monochrome abstraction has two versions; one white

and one black. At one extreme, Malevich's Suprematist paintings mark the birth of the cosmos of pure geometric abstraction. At the other extreme, Reinhardt's late paintings seem like black holes belonging to the devolutionary stage of this process when energy totally implodes.

Evacuating form from his gridded formats while dimming the lights to a maddenly low level, Reinhardt worked on canvas after slyly nuanced canvas, all the while proudly declaring I'm merely making the last paintings which anyone can make' For Reinhardt, painting was what was left over after you took everything away.

When it came to what that meant in practice, Reinhardt's litany of disallowals was long and absolute:

No lines or imaginings, no shapes or composing or representings, no visions or sensations or impulses, no symbols or signs or impastos, no decoratings or colorings or picturings, no pleasures or pains, no accidents or readymades, no things, no ideas, no relations, no attributes, no qualities

- nothing that is not of the essence."2

Ryman would concur with some of the items on this list but not the sentiment behind it. An erudite iconoclast and dialectician, Reinhardt denounced those who refused to sacrifice all to their modernist faith, and so banish all vestiges of abstraction's former compromises with representation. Ryman, on the other hand, approached the matter from an equally strict but affirmative point of view. Instead of concerning himself with an impossible Platonic perfection, he turned his sights on an achievable - and elegant - simplicity. At what point, he asked pratically, did a painter have enough to work with - and nothing superfluous?

The positive emphasis of this formulation is significant to the extent that most other explanations of reductive painting emphasize what has been eliminated from the artist's options. Even the use of adjectives like reductive' in this context is problematic, since it presupposes that painting has inherent qualities that painters of our day have removed from it, and that the history of modern art is an accounting of those subtractions. Or, as Thomas McEvilley recently argued in defence of this view, 'No absence is simply absence; absence is already a kind of narration.'73 Regardless of how that narrative is written, or how these subtractions have been justified in the name of purifying art's spirit or form, so long as abstract painting is explained primarily in relation to its evolution away from its historical origins,

its latent content will remain one version or another of loss, denial or heroic absti-nance.

Reversing this perspective, Ryman has identified the elements sufficient to the medium in order to reveal the beauty of that sufficiency. What Ryman calls 'Real-ism' involves more than the actuality of the object, however; it entails jettisoning much of the philosophical and historical freight that modern art accumulated in the formative stages but now carries into maturity at ever greater cost to its vitality.

Nevertheless, Ryman has been a favourite contemporary' painter among critics of an historicist bent and has been called the 'last modernist' by one of his most dedicated supporters from this camp, Yve-Alain Bois. Despite this, Ryman has explicitly rejected the idea that we are witnessing the finale of modernism.

'Abstraction is a relatively recent approach to painting. I think abstract painting is just beginning. All possibilities are open to it in ways we can't envision. I think painting is moving too slowly, but of course it is the nature of painting to evolve slowly. I feel that the possibilities of painting are so great, and that we've just scratched the surface. Why, then, should we not believe him when he is providing the proof? Furthermore, why not lend a receptive ear to his corollary admonition that 'a painter is only limited by his degree of perception. Painting is only limited by the known.' The known includes styles of thinking as well as styles of making, the academy of 'whys' as well as the academy of 'whats'. Neither a vanguard artist nor a traditional one, Ryman wants to free painting both from its past and from antiquated visions of its future."

Although he has followed the protocols of essentialist painting, Ryman's polite refusal to subscribe to its dogmas is grounded in his trust of aesthetic instinct. That trust completes his bond with Rothko.

[Rothko's] work might have a similarity with mine in the sense they may both be kind of romantic, if you want it. I mean in the sense that Rothko is not a mathematician, his work has very much to do with feeling, with sensitivity. The word romantic can be taken in several ways, I guess. I mean in the good sense, in opposition to the mathematician, you know the theorist, the person who has everything worked out beforehand.?8

Ryman's identification of himself and Rothko as 'romantic' doesn't tally with the frequent impression of him as the perfectionist proponent of an impersonal aesthetic. But the discrepancy between his self-image and public

perception may be explained by a basic cultural bias rooted in a traditional opposition of mind and body, intellect and feeling, measured articulation and expressive spontaneity.

Such a dichotomous view of human nature results in descriptions of Ryman's painting that treat it as a product of a purely cerebral sensibility, neglecting the richness of paint in one particular work, or its luminosity in another. More incomprehensibly still, some feel compelled to condemn the work's quietness as witholding. But Ryman is not playing hard-to-get. The presumption that he is, coupled with a frustrated insistence on categorical antitheses in art, are signs of puritanism in revolt against itself. The special irony of such frustration being vented on Ryman is that his work dissolves these bedevilling oppositions and offers release from a direction we seldom expect it - not, that is, from an anxious or brooding romanticism but from an utterly serene one.

. While the radical spareness of Ryman's work stirs resentment in some viewers, in others it provokes sympathetic but equally inappropriate metaphysical rumination. Typical of this reaction is the following from a recent article by Dan Cameron:

Suddenly [Ryman's] paintings weren't really paintings anymore; they were like pictures in the magnified sense of representing an ideal about painting which simply cannot be realized in any other way. It may seem simplistic but I have always imagined Ryman chose the format of the white painting in part because he knew that it would draw out the viewer's inclination to project one's desire across its surface. It is almost as if the artist were proferring us a vessel in which signification can be conveyed while asking us to go fill it ourselves.79

In his essay, McEvilley said much the same thing, adding a critique of Clement Greenberg's formalist theories:

Greenberg's doctrine of the purely optical had somehow allowed for concepts such as Newman's 'stretched red,' in which 'what you see' is supposedly nothing less than the sublime. The 'purely optical' then becomes a vehicle for all sorts of metaphysical content to be supplied by the viewer, who would likely know from verbal supplements, however, what the artist intended by a particular abstract field. In this context, to say,

"The painting is exactly what you see' is merely to point to a blank that needs to be filled in. What the statement communicates powerfully, however, is the artist's reluctance to fill it in himself. Indeed, in and of itself

the work may suggest many things, sparking a train of associations that go far beyond raw perception. I don't think Ryman can eliminate that aspect of his art merely by denying it.80

Both these statements persuade to the extent that they invoke the commonly held belief that art is ultimately validated by the references it makes to meaningful things outside itself - that is by its mimetic or symbolic content. Both convert Ryman's self-sufficient 'Realism' back into an evocative 'Abstraction,' leaving the question of why he is so reticent to identify his works' 'hidden' subject matter open to still more vexing guesswork.

Ryman is well aware that it is beyond his power to prevent people from reading extrinsic things into his work. 'I have no control over what someone sees. You can fantasy [sic] about things. You can look at clouds and see faces in the clouds, that kind of thing. That's not really there; it's just the imagination of the viewer. 81 As far as Ryman is concerned, the mystical auras perceived by some in his paintings have the same status as the faces seen hidden in clouds. And they are an impediment to understanding in that they place greater value on looking for something that is not there than on seeing what is.

Far from evading the question of his work's meaning, Ryman has answered it on numerous occasions. The poetry of painting has to do with feeling' he declared. 'It should be kind of a revelation, even a reverent experience. If you can tune into the frequency of what you are experiencing, you come away feeling very good, you feel sustained. " The conditions Ryman sets for the viewer are only stated so that such a revelation can be made accessible on its proper terms - and those terms are unequivocally actual. Pictorial or illusionistic art requires a suspension of disbelief;

Ryman's 'Realism'

requires a suspension of wanting - that is, a letting go of

conditioned need and conditioned responses. The reverence he is after is a reverence for things of this world, and it is an exceptional experience to the degree that we are so unaccustomed to the level of concentration it requires. Any considerations of a formal, philosophical, or historical nature are secondary to that goal and contrary to it when they preoccupy and distract the viewer's mind. Whether it is abstract or representational, that's what [painting] is, that's what it does. Everything else about it - the why of it, the what and the when - the technical aspect of it is interesting and necessary

for deeper understanding. But that's not the purpose, or the goal of painting. The primary experience is that experience you receive of enlightenment. '83

Enlightenment, in Ryman's sense, consists of unhurried pleasure taken in the here and now. And, by its nature, pleasure can never be made intellectually respec-table. That is why it is so disconcerting when presented in its 'pure' form. 8 Pure in the sense of unalloyed, rather than in the sense of puritanically cleansed, for Ryman is not among modernism's ascetics. Turning the tables on a Protestant culture that subordinates enjoyment to a higher good, Ryman is a gently subversive hedonist, intending nothing more or less than to delight himself and others, with no strings attached. His sympathy for Matisse resides in this above all - and his lack of involvement with most of the geometric abstractionists with whom he has been compared. To be sure, Ryman's gentle craving for Matissean 'luxe, calme et volupté' is satisfied in ways consistent with an American commitment to plainness. Devoid of excess and radiantly balanced, Ryman's paintings put one 'in the place just right', to borrow a phrase from the Shaker hymn from which this essay also takes its title.

Nonetheless, his means of thus situating the viewer is as exquisite in its way as Matisse's - and as unapologetic in its direct appeal to the senses.

The idyllic longing Matisse's work embodies is ultimately insatiable. Therein also lies the bittersweet essence of Ryman's work. His art's poignancy doesn't depend on the imminent conclusion of the painterly tradition to which it belongs but instead on the unrelenting impulse to which it responds as a part of that tradition. Among Ryman's early works - and among his favourites - is a casein on paper of 1958 (no.6). Unique in his oeuvre, it is inscribed with a text that reads:

'THE PARADOXICAL ABSOLUTE'. When asked what he intended by that, the artist answered that the idea had just came to him without warning. Thad been reading some philosophy and I had been thinking about the word absolute and I was trying to get at the meaning of it. It had to do with painting also. I was thinking about painting in general and it just seemed paradoxical.& In the context of what Ryman has made between then and now, the paradox appears obvious, but the clarity with which he rephrased it in paint is dazzling. Seemingly absolute in the moment of experience, true pleasure demands to be repeated as soon as that moment passes, and just as soon we know that the means of finding it again have already changed.

The paradox of pleasure is that the feeling desired is ever the same in its totality, but the source of that feeling can never be the same twice. So it is with painting.

Accordingly, Ryman has pursued the pleasures of proportion, light, touch, colour, and space in a completely intuitive manner - since intuition, not reason, is the only faculty capable of measuring its fulfilment. And he has been generous in this endeavour. Painting after painting, Ryman provides us an ecstatic tranquillity that is constant in its intensity because subtly but constantly surprising in its guise. We have only to accept that offer.

NOTES

Material for this essay came from a number of sources cited below, and was enriched by reviewing the writings of numerous critics not directly quoted or otherwise mentioned in my text.

Excerpts from the work of some of these critics appear in the Chronology. Other than that, I drew heavily on information gathered by Catherine Kinley at the Tate Gallery, and Lynn Zelevansky, Alina Pellicer and Noriko Fuku at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Linda Norden, who is currently compiling a catalogue raisonné of Ryman's paintings, was also very generous in offering this project the benefit of her research. And, I should add, like anyone writing on Ryman, I owe a special debt to the detailed formal analysis of the artist's oeuvre by Naomi Spector, published in several instalments during the 197os. Finally I must thank Robert Ryman for his careful responses to my persistent questioning on several occasions over a period of several years.

The little that is known about Ryman has prompted some critics to draw unwarranted inferences about his character from his paintings.The image of the artist as a man driven by a compulsive fastidiousness is one of the more common of such misconceptions.

Robert Ryman in taped conversation with Robert Storr, June 1992. Referred to as Ryman to Storr, 1992.)

Ibid.

Ibid.s Ibid. Given current controversy about public funding of the arts, it is worthwhile noting that prior to the now much embattled National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) two major pro-grammes of the United States Federal Government have played a major part in fostering the arts in America. The first and best known was the variety of relief programmes instituted during

the Great Depression and generally referred to by the initials of one, the Works Projects Administration (WPA). The second was the so-called GI Bill which granted veterans financial support toward their post-service education. Just as many of the most important artists of the Abstract Expressionist generation were only able to survive and develop because of the WPA, many of the major figures of the next generation studied and supported themselves with assistance from the GI Bill. Ryman originally intended to use his benefits this way but gave up when he found the schools open to him to be too limiting, hence the necessity of self-financing his self-education.

• 'Robert Ryman, interview with Robert Storr on October 17, 1986' in Rosemary Schwarzwalder, Abstract Painting of America and Europe, Galerie Nächst St Stephan, Vienna (pub. 1988), p. 214. (Refer-red to as 'Ryman to Storr, 1986'.)

' Ryman to Storr, 1992.

8 Matisse, 'Letter to Henry Clifford' in Jack D.Flam (ed.), Matisse on Art, New York 1978, p. 120.

› Ryman in Grace Glueck,

'The 2oth Century

Artists Most Admired by Other Artists, Art News, Nov. 1977. P-99.

10 For a more detailed listing of works shown at The Museum of Modern Art and in other New York galleries during this period, see the Chronology.

" Ryman to Storr, 1992.

12 Ryman to Storr, 1986, p.215, Ryman to Storr,1992.

" Ryman in Nancy Grimes, 'White Magic', Art

News, Summer 1986, p.89.

4 Ibid., p.90.

16 Lucy Lippard, 'The Silent Art', Art in America, Jan. - Feb. 1967, P.58.

" Ryman in Grimes, 'White Magic', 1986, p.90.

Achille Bonito Oliva, 'Robert Ryman Inter-viewed', Domus, Feb. 1973, P.50. Ad Reinhardt wrote numerous texts on the symbolism of black, but he also relied

upon it because of its virtue as a 'non-colour' much as Ryman chose white for its neutrality.

Ryman in Christopher Lyons, 'Ryman Retains Subtle Style', Chicago Sun-Times, 10 May 1985.

Ryman to Storr, 1986, p.215.

Phyllis Tuchman, 'An Interview with Robert Ryman', Artforum, May 1971, P.46.

As the late critic Barbara Reise noted, circles are, like squares, entirely symmetrical. Thus they offered Ryman an alternative to his usual format in a handful of works on paper. Their traditional use as symbols for centredness and the cosmos lends them connotations problematic to an art as strictly non-referential as Ryman's. It might be added that critical treatment of Eva Hesse's contemporaneous use of circles confirms this tendency to read symbolic significance into the shape, although in Hesse's case the meaning of the work was importantly enriched by these associations. Incidentally, Reise's essay also recounts that in his interview with Tuchman, Ryman himself drew attention to the fact that the measurements for his paintings are frequently off-square by a quarter to half an inch on a given side and therefore not mathematically exact in the way of some more scientific or idealistic forms of geometric art. See Barbara Reise, 'Robert Ryman: Senza Titolo III (Posi-zione)', Data, Spring 1974, p.32, and Tuchman,'An Interview with Robert Ryman', 1971, p.46.

Ryman in Grimes, 'White Magic', 1986, p.90.Incidentally, Ryman once took a snapshot of his room and painted around the tilted shape of the two windows so that they floated in the overall red of the otherwise cancelled image (see p.212). This play on the window space of pictures and the actual windows of the painter's studio is a unique Duchampian digression from Ryman's strictly non-pictorial, and unironic production.

Ryman to Storr, 1992.

Robert Ryman interviewed in Barbaralee Dia-monstein, Inside New York's Art World, 1979, P. 332.

Ryman's statement for Art in Process, Finch College Museum of Art, New York 1969.

For a literal use of this motif in painting see Roy Lichtenstein's 'Entablature' paintings of the early to mid 1970S.

In the 1970s, Robert Pincus-Witten's barbed appreciation of Ryman spoke for a certain insecure aestheticism inflected by the then ascendancy of idea-based art. In order to maintain his critical balance between pure taste and pure intellect, Pincus-Witten typecast artists about whom he wrote to fit one or the other extreme.Compounded by his assertion that 'Minimalism is remembered as an heroic architectural ambitious style which made greater sense in sculpture than in paintings', Pincus-Witten thus set up an invidious comparison between Brice Marden, whom he labels a 'sensibility painter' and Ryman, whom he claims 'is interested in painting as theory and one is therefore tempted to say he is not interested in painting at all'. 'Ryman', Pincus-Witten continued his analysis, may determine as an act of pre-executive choice the

kind of brushstrokes to be employed... These decisions remove the brushstroke from esthetic graphicism, from calligraphy, from sensibility.

Though liberated from sensibility, however, the strokes still remain within the definition of what might reasonably constitute the act of painting.

By contrast Marden's brushstrokes are a function of praxis; they rely on the very experience of painting. Before anything else his strokes are aesthetic gestures, despite the reductive orientation of his work'. Ignoring for now the misrepresentation of Marden's work, suffice it to say that what Pincus-Witten dismissively describes as the 'pre-executive choice' of strokes that he grudgingly acknowledges do remain within the definition of what might reasonably constitute the act of painting' are in fact the considered marks of an artist who had devoted years to intuitional 'praxis' of exactly the kind he ascribes to Marden. The paintings of 1955-65 under discussion are proof. Furthermore, the difference then and now between these two artists doesn't hang upon the absolute dominance of 'theoretical' ideas over 'natural" sensibility or vice versa. It has to do with when and how accidents and process-derived dis-coveries, methodically pursued, transcend or are subordinated to style. In short, it is a matter of differences in studio practice rather than of antithetical types of talent. See Robert Pincus-Witten,

'Robert Ryman', Artforum, April 1970, PP-75-6, and 'Ryman, Marden, Manzoni" Artforum, June

Full retrospectives took place at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1974, the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in 1977, the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, in 1981, the Espace d'art con-temporain, Paris in 1991-2, and a synoptic installation of Ryman's work has been on view at the Hallen für

neue Kunst in Schaffhausen since 1983. Except for one or two appearances in annual exhibitions at the roth Street Brata Gallery and occasional participation exhibitions organized by the American Abstract Artists, Ryman scarcely showed at all during the first ten years of his career. Since then no real notice has been taken in America of his early work, other than a small survey at John Weber Gallery in 1972 that included some examples of his paintings from the 1950s. That same year, the Guggenheim Museum mounted Ryman's first New York retrospective; the exhibition, in an effort to align Ryman with minimalism, ignored everything he had done prior to 1964. His only other major American museum show, at the Dia Art Foundation in 1988, concentrated on paintings of the 198os and included

Although a critical advocate of Ryman's art, Reise lamented the amount of attention paid to Ryman's early work in his Stedelijk exhibition.

See Barbara Reise, 'Robert Ryman at the Stedelijk', Art in America, July-Aug. 1974, p.91.

32 Ryman in Maurice Poirier and Jane Necol, The60's in Abstract: 1 3 Statements and an Essay, Art

4 The assumed influence of Johns and Ruaschen-berg is of long-standing. For example, in 1972 Robert Pincus-Witten asserts it categorically:'It is worth noting that Ryman's earliest mature work dating from 1958-59, also recently exhibited at the John Weber Gallery, obviously derives from the same source [Jasper Johns] (as well as from Rauschenberg 1949) [sic].' Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Ryman, Marden, Manzoni",

...